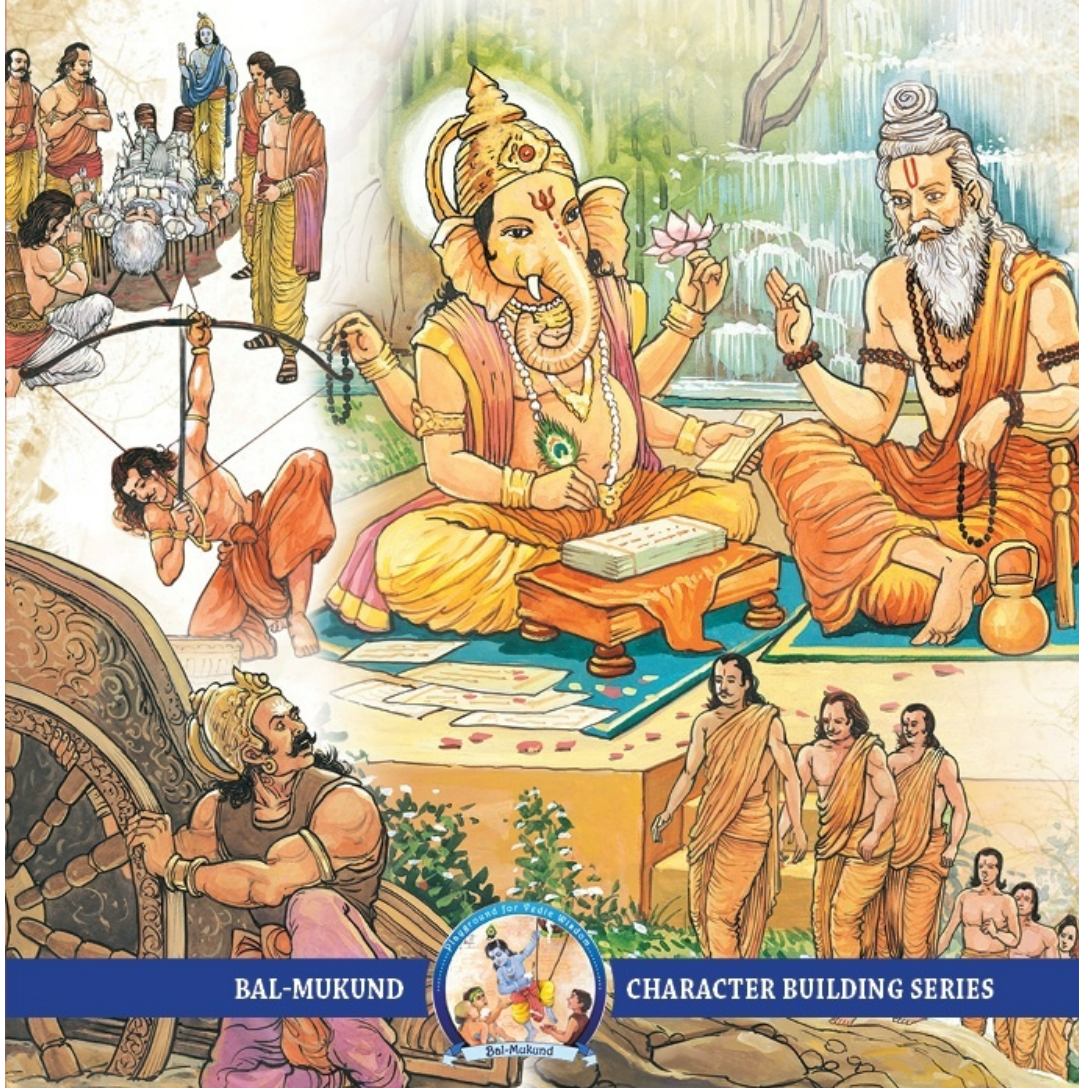


MAHABHARAT

THE STORY OF VIRTUE AND DHARMA



BAL-MUKUND

CHARACTER BUILDING SERIES

MAHABHARAT

The Story of Virtue and Dharma

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to our Beloved Spiritual Master, Jagadguru Shree Kripaluji Maharaj, who is illuminating this world with the purest rays of Divine knowledge and love.

He taught us by his example, the importance of nurturing souls with love and care, to help them realize a glorious future. He gave us the supreme process of building a noble value system by teaching selfless Divine love.

We are confident that by his blessings this book will be helpful in inspiring and elevating seekers, thereby creating a better world for all of us.

Swami Mukundananda

Foreword

The Mahabharat is one of the most renowned epic poems of all times. It contains 100,000 couplets, and is nearly eight times as long as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey put together. This colossal epic was composed by the renowned sage Ved Vyas, and it was none other than Lord Ganesh who assisted him in scripting this enormous text.

The Mahabharat is an extremely gripping narrative of internecine warfare in the Kuru family. It tells the story of how the Kauravas resorted to the deceit and treachery to cheat the Pandavas of their kingdom, how the Pandavas fought for their rights, and how in the end good triumphed over evil. However, unlike the Greek epics, the Mahabharat is much more than an enthralling story. It conveys a very strong philosophical and spiritual message. It is interspersed with numerous episodes that serve as great lessons for tackling difficult situations that we may encounter in our day-to-day life.

Over the centuries, people have drawn great inspiration and spiritual strength from the Mahabharat. Its interesting array of characters display almost the entire spectrum of human emotions including jealousy, greed, pride, selfishness, hatred, evil, kindness, sacrifice, friendship, forgiveness, truth, faith, obedience, and love. On the one hand, there are noble characters like Bhishma, Vidur, Gandhari, Drona, and Yudhishtra. On the other hand there are evil characters like Duryodhan, Shakuni, Dushasan, and Jayadrath. Then there are the heroic characters like Arjun, Karna, Bheem, Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha. And above all, there is Shree Krishna himself, the Supreme Lord of all creation! Most of the characters of the Mahabharat are human, with their own faults and foibles, which makes it easier to relate to their struggles.

For the Hindus, another reason to revere this sacred text is that the most prized jewel of the Vedic scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita, finds its home within the core of the Mahabharat. As if to reinforce the fact that the message of the Bhagavad Gita is applicable in even the most difficult conditions, Lord Krishna revealed the Bhagavad Gita to Arjun on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, in the extremely chaotic setting of the onset of the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Bhagavad Gita consists of only 700 verses, arranged in 18 cantos, but it contains the essence of the entire Vedic wisdom. Such is the power of its teachings that they continue to guide generations. In more recent times, famous thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Robert Oppenheimer, Carl Jung, Herman Hesse, and Aldous Huxley, to name just a few, have acknowledged the inspiration they have drawn from the Bhagavad Gita.

The Mahabharat is truly a timeless classic and its message is highly relevant even in this day and age. Among other things, the Mahabharat teaches the importance of leading a righteous life, doing one's duty selflessly without worrying about the outcome, not resorting to duplicity and perfidy, not being addicted to vices like gambling, not coveting what belongs to others, and standing up gallantly against injustice. Within the Mahabharat we also find treatises on many disciplines including dharma, governance, philosophy, morality and virtue.

I hope that this abridged version of Mahabharat, which is one of our noblest heritages, will guide and inspire the next generation of business and political leaders, journalists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, health-care professionals, and social workers throughout their lives.

Swami Mukundananda

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1. The Sarp Yajna

Janmejaya sat silently on his throne, his handsome face solemn. He was a young man in his prime, his powerful body dressed in silk robes and flashing gems. His crown, the crown of his ancestor King Yudhishtira, glittered in the light of the holy fire as Janmejaya watched the Pundits perform the great *Sarp yajna*.

The Pundits sat on a huge earthen platform, prepared exactly as the scriptures prescribed, surrounding the holy fire. Reciting mantras from the Vedas, the priests offered *ghee* and grains into the fire as they chanted together: “*Swaha!*”

They called the names of serpents and Janmejaya watched as the snakes appeared from all directions. Helpless against the power of the mantras, the serpents were pulled to the *yajna* place and into the fire itself. The snakes hissed and fought against the power that compelled them but it was useless to fight. The mantras forced them into the flames.

“*Swaha!*” the Pundits chanted as black and green serpents fell out of the blue sky and into the orange fire.

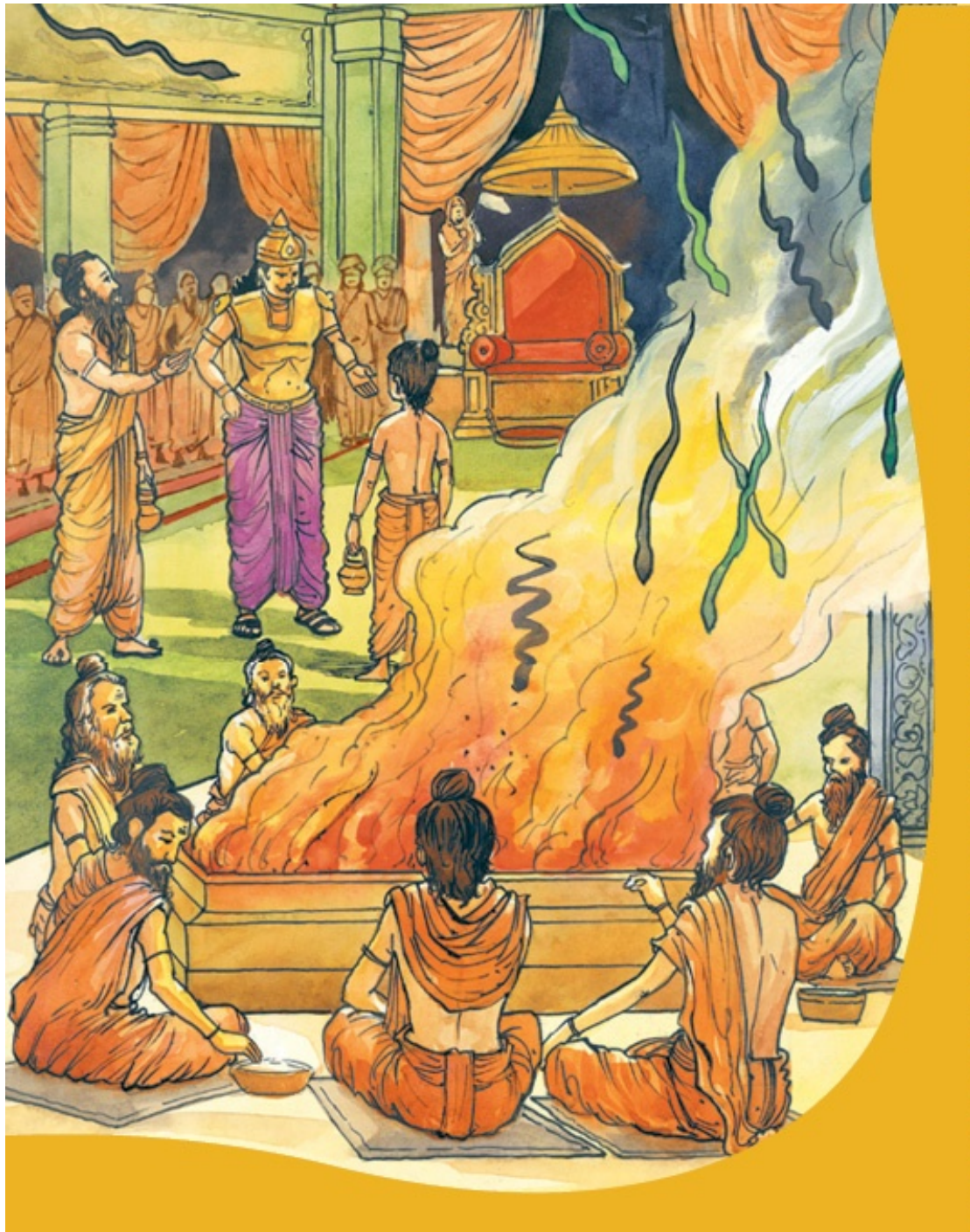
Janmejaya gritted his teeth and kept watching, even though it was difficult to

see so much life end. He must take revenge for his father's death. His father, noble King Parikshit, had been killed by the serpent king Takshak.

It was Janmejaya's duty to see that justice was done for everyone in his kingdom of Hastinapur. So when the Pundit Uttank had come to him and asked Janmejaya why he wasn't giving justice to his own father, Janmejaya had been dismayed. He'd been very young when Parikshit had gone away and he'd not known how father had died. When Uttank informed him that his father's murderer, Takshak, roamed free in the land, Janmejaya was furious.

He swore that he would punish his father's murderer and this *yajna* was the result of his vow.

"*Swaha!*" the Pundits chanted, as orange and silver and gold snakes were pulled up from the ground and dragged towards the *yajna* by the mantras.



“Save us! Save us!” the serpents called out to anyone who would listen.

“Swaha!” the Pundits chanted and the serpents fell into the fire, hissing as they burned.

The area around the sacrifice was filled with priests and sages as they worked to fulfill complicated *yajna* rules. Janmejaya had invited all the Pundits of the land to come and every day more arrived to assist and advise him.

As was Janmejy's duty, he donated much in charity during this time. All the people in his land were given food and clothing even when they didn't need it because there could be no interruptions during the *yajna*. Janmejy had expertly planned the running of the kingdom and the festivities of the *yajna* to make this possible.

"*Swaha!*" the Pundits chanted as blue and brown serpents were pulled from the waters of the world and rushed to the flames.

"Help us! Help us!" the serpents cried out, writhing as they tried to prevent themselves from falling into the *yajna*.

Janmejy was so intent on watching that he was startled to see a young boy dressed only in a loin cloth walk boldly before him.

"Great King," the boy said and Janmejy realized from the boy's radiance that he was a sage. His garment was of simple cotton and he carried the water pot of a Pundit. The boy looked to be about ten years old.

Janmejy rose from his throne and folded his hands in respect even though the boy was so young. "You're welcome here, Great Sage," he said. "May I ask what your name is and who your parents are?"

"My name is Astik," the boy said. "I am the son of Sage Jaratkaru and *Devi Manasa*."

"Save us! Save us!" the serpents were crying out.

"I'm very glad you have come, Sage Astik," Janmejy told him. "I wish to give you a gift to show my appreciation. What do you desire?"

Astik looked calmly up at Janmejy. "Great King," Astik said, "I desire that you stop this *yajna*."

Janmejy gaped at the boy. "What?"

"For my gift I ask that you stop this *yajna*. Stop this mindless violence."

"Sage Astik, perhaps you do not know but my father was murdered by the serpent king Takshak. This *yajna* is to grant justice to him."

"So to punish one serpent you will kill all snakes?" Astik said. "Great King, this

is wrong. You seek revenge but revenge is not justice.”

Janmejaya stood there in shock. It was true that he found it difficult to watch all these snakes die yet surely that was just his compassion. A king had to punish wrong-doers regardless of whether it made him sad.

“And what about my father?” Janmejaya said to Astika. “He was murdered!”

“Your father was not murdered,” Astika told Janmejaya.

Janmejaya gasped. “What?”

“It’s true that Takshaka bit your father and Parikshit died but the serpent king was not the cause of your father’s death,” Astika said. “Parikshit had been cursed to die. Takshaka was the one to bite him, not curse him. It wasn’t the serpent king’s fault.”

Janmejaya was wide-eyed. He’d known nothing of this!

“It’s true, Great King,” a deep voice spoke. Janmejaya turned and saw that the great Sage Vyasa was approaching with a crowd of his disciples. They must have just arrived at the *yajna*.

Janmejaya fell to his knees and touched Vyasa’s feet.

Vyasa lifted his hand in blessing. His dark skin was lined with many years of age and his silver beard flowed down his thin chest, falling well below his waist. “Great King,” Vyasa said. “What Astika says is true. Revenge against Takshaka and his people is wrong.”

“Revenge is always wrong,” Astika said. “It was such mindless violence that destroyed your ancestors, King Janmejaya.” The young sage shook his head. “You are ignorant of your own history. How can you do justice as a king when you do not know the truth?”

“Then what is the truth?” Janmejaya asked. “Who cursed my father to die? Why? When?”

“First stop this violence,” Vyasa said, “and then all your questions will be answered.”

Janmejaya was still kneeling at Vyasa’s feet. He bowed his head and considered Vyasa’s words.

This *yajna* was incredibly complicated. Janmejaya had worked so hard to follow all the rules and regulations. If Janmejaya stopped everything then all that hard work would be ruined. The *yajna*'s power would be lost and Janmejaya would never have revenge against Takshak.

But Vyas and Astik said that Takshak was not to blame. They said this *Sarp yajna* was wrong. They said that Janmejaya was ignorant.

Janmejaya didn't want to be ignorant. He wanted to be just and true. He wanted to give his people dharma, like his father. He rose to his feet to address the Pundits who were about to offer more *ghee* and grains into the fire, and chant: "*Swaha!*"

Janmejaya stretched out his arm. "Stop."



2. Vaishampayan and Vyas

With the *yajna* halted, Janmejaya descended from his royal dais. He snapped his fingers at his servants and they immediately brought golden plates holding pots of rose water. Janmejaya washed the feet of young Sage Astika, elderly Sage Vyas, and all of Vyas's disciples. To Sage Vyas, he gave his own golden throne that was studded with priceless gems, flashing in the light. Janmejaya seated the rest on elevated seats in the *yajna* arena.

"Great Sage," Janmejaya said to Vyas, kneeling before him on the dais. "I request that now you tell me the answers to my questions. Why did my father die? How did revenge tear my ancestors apart? Please enlighten me about the history of my family."

"It's not for me to teach you, Great King," Vyas said, turning to one of his disciples. "Vaishampayan."

Seated to Vyas's right, a young man with jet black hair jolted in his seat. "Gurudev?"

Vyas smiled. "It's your task to give Janmejaya answers."

"Mine? But how can I when you are present?" Vaishampayan asked, clutching at his saffron robes. "You are elder and my Gurudev. You should enlighten the

king.”

“For the new generation, a new guru must speak,” Vyas said. “Elders cannot hold on forever. I educated Janmejaya’s grandfathers and great-grandfathers but the next generation of gurus will educate Janmejaya. Young Astik has already begun this task and now you must follow his lead.” Vyas rose from the throne and gestured with his arm.

Obedying his guru’s command, Vaishampayan rose and sat upon Vyas’s seat.

Vyas sat in Vaishampayan’s old seat with satisfaction. There was nothing more fulfilling for a guru than to know that his disciple was enlightened and enlightening others.

The Pundits sitting in the *yajna* called out praises to them both. The entire crowd in the *yajna* arena gathered around to hear Vaishampayan’s wisdom. Janmejaya sat at Vaishampayan’s feet.

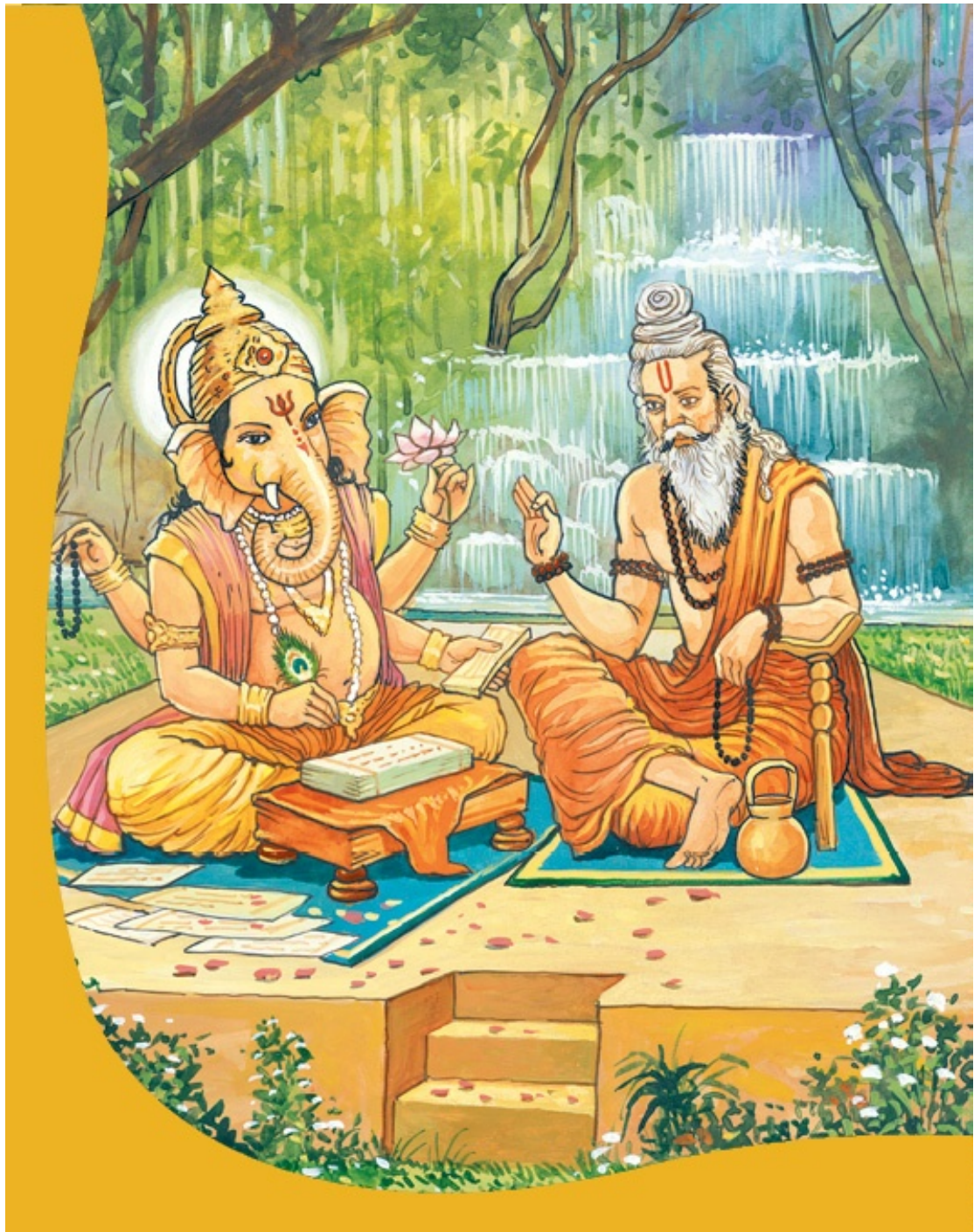
“Great King,” Vaishampayan said, “and all you enlightened souls, devotees, sages, *devatas*, and mortals - I bow to you all. Saying a prayer to the Almighty Lord Vishnu, I will now tell you the *katha* of this great scripture that my Gurudev, Sage Krishna Dwaipayana Vyas, has composed. This *katha* will answer all of your questions because it contains all the wisdom of the world. It is about prosperity and pleasure, truth and dharma. It is about ethics and politics and justice. It is about love and the ultimate love of God. This *katha* contains the means to attain salvation. Those who listen to this *katha* and share it with others are washed of all their sins and attain victory and therefore this *katha* is called ‘Jai’.

“Great King,” he said to Janmejaya, “this scripture is the history of your family, the Bharat clan, and therefore, it is also called ‘Mahabharat’. But this ‘Mahabharat’ is not just for your royal clan. It is for all in society, for men and women, for young and old, for poor and rich. This scripture belongs to all of humanity because it is the fifth Veda.”

Janmejaya was rapt as he gazed at Vaishampayan.

Vaishampayan bowed towards his guru who was seated beside him. “Sage Vyas knew that in the coming age of *Kali yug* human society would break down. The people would drown in ignorance and poverty and war. He wanted

to find a way to help them, to teach them even if they felt they couldn't learn. He wanted to give them a way to remember their history, so that the lessons of the past are learned for the future. For this a new scripture was required, a scripture for all those people who are vulnerable because society is prejudiced against them. In particular are the women, the poor, and the illiterate. Vyas wrote this epic scripture to teach the truths of the world to all people, regardless of how society mistreats them.



“To do this momentous task, Sage Vyas asked for assistance from Lord Ganesh himself. Vyas requested that Ganesh be the scribe to write the poetry as Vyas spoke it.

“Lord Ganesh is benevolent towards humanity. He agreed but he wanted to test Vyas’s worthiness for such a goal. Ganesh gave one condition that he would act as scribe only if there were no interruptions to Vyas’s reciting. The moment there was an interruption, Ganesh would disappear.

“This was a big problem because it meant that Vyas would have no time to rest or bathe or sleep or eat. But my guru is very clever. He agreed to Ganesh’s condition and gave a condition of his own. He said that Ganesh was only allowed to write down the words when he fully understood them. Lord Ganesh acquiesced and they began a work that took not just hours or days but months and years.

“They sat outside, under the sun, facing each other as Vyas spoke and Ganesh wrote. When Vyas felt the need to rest, he would recite a particularly difficult couplet that would take Ganesh some time to understand. Then Vyas would eat a few leaves and berries, drink some water, perhaps stand and walk around, or go inside his hut to sleep.

“In this way, Sage Krishna Dwaipayana Vyas composed the Mahabharat scripture. Sacrificing food and much rest and even small comforts for days and weeks and months at a time, Vyas recited the Mahabharat *katha*, the longest poem in the world. And he did this for you, Great King. For me. For all of humanity.”

Janmejaya looked with wonder at Sage Vyas, who was sitting so calmly on the side. Janmejaya couldn’t believe how generous Vyas was, that he had performed such difficult austerities to give the world the Mahabharat.

He looked at how thin Vyas was from his long fasting, how dark his skin was from sitting outside in the sun for so long. Vyas’s long grey hair was in dreadlocks, coiled around his head in the manner of sages. His saffron robes were thin from many washings, barely covering his body.

Vyas was so humble that he didn’t even recite his own scripture. He gave it to his disciple Vaishampayana to share with others. He took nothing for himself and gave everything away.

Janmejaya didn’t know how to say what he was feeling. He didn’t have the words. He remained silent and knew that the best way to show his gratitude was to listen to the Mahabharat and learn its message.

“Great King,” Vaishampayana said, “now that you know how my guru wrote this scripture, I will tell you how your family came to be known as the Bharat clan. Listen.



3. What it Means to be King

King Dushyant of the mighty Kuru clan married Shakuntala, the adopted daughter of Sage Kanva.

While her husband Dushyant was in the city, ruling his people, Shakuntala raised their baby boy in her father's hermitage, surrounded by the peace of the forest. Her son's name was Bharat and every day Bharat would listen to Sage Kanva chanting the mantras of the Vedas. The Vedas filled Bharat with a sense of dharma. He knew it was his duty to protect others so even though he was only a little boy, if wild beasts tried to disturb the peace of Kanva's *ashram*, Bharat would control them with great strength. He never killed the animals. He only subdued them and made them peaceful because that was his dharma. Seeing Bharat do this, Sage Kanva called him Sarvadaman, the subduer of all. Bharat would be a great warrior.

As Bharat became older, Shakuntala took him to live with his father in the city and there Dushyant instructed Bharat in the teachings of kings and leaders. When Dushyant retired, Bharat became king as was tradition.

He continued the wise ruling of his father and the kingdom was peaceful and prosperous but Bharat soon realized that territories outside his kingdom were suffering. They had cruel corrupt rulers who created wars for money, wasting

human life. The people in these countries sent messages to Bharat, asking for help. Bharat wanted to keep his people out of war but the pleas of his neighbors were heartfelt and Bharat could not ignore them.

Taking the mighty army of the Kuru clan, Bharat attacked the corrupt rulers. True to Bharat's name, Sarvadaman, he subdued the cruel leaders with martial skill and then diplomacy, and brought the innocent people under his direct protection. Instead of war, friendship and treaties were encouraged. The people were allowed to trade and travel and share with other countries, creating a culture of law, order, and prosperity all over the land. The people became peaceful and healthy because they were free from fear. As they were not constantly at war they were able to pursue more spiritual lives. Bharat thus performed grand *yajnas* to promote cooperation and friendship amongst countries and share spiritual benefits with all his people. He distributed such wealth and charity at these events that it impressed other rulers and they supported him. Eventually he performed the *Rajsuya yajna* with their permission and that *yajna* granted him the title of Emperor.

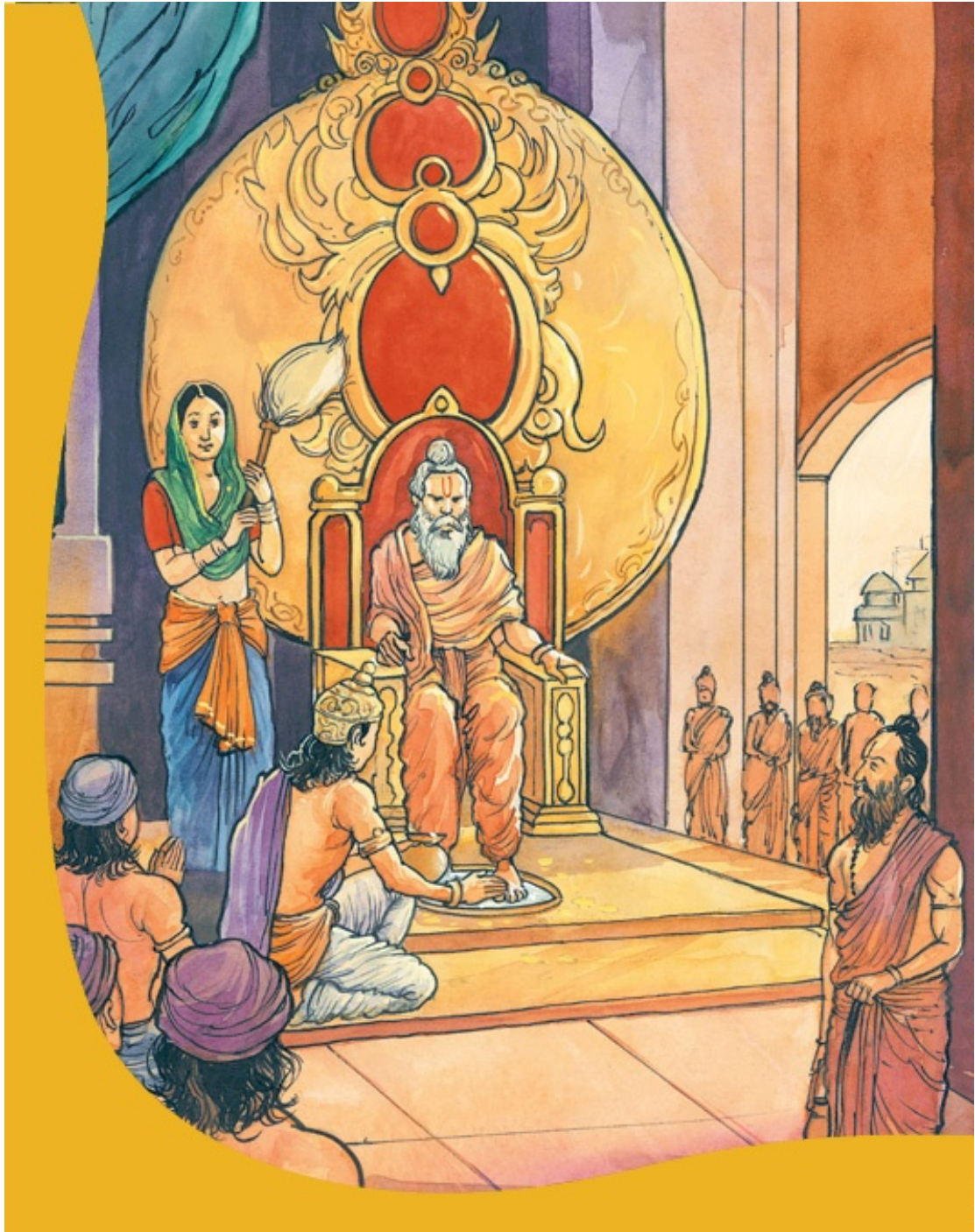
In all the lands from the Himalayas in the north to the great ocean in the south, from the borders of China in the east to the borders beyond Afghanistan in the west, the people called Bharat their emperor. Yet Bharat had not stolen those countries for himself. They were independent and ruled themselves. Bharat had created an empire that was bound together by spirituality and law, by the Vedas and peace. People from diverse cultures were free to travel and communicate and trade and share. The people loved Bharat for giving them this freedom and they named his empire 'Bharat' after him.

Bharat had nine sons but none of them were like him. Instead of wanting to serve the people, they wanted only to be rich and powerful. Instead of desiring to protect others, they desired only to protect themselves. They didn't even care for each other, even though they were brothers, and fought amongst themselves.

As Bharat grew older, he realized that his sons had no respect for the peaceful empire he had created. They wanted only riches. They thrived on conflict. How could he hand the empire over to his sons, knowing that they would tear it apart? It was Bharat's dharma to protect his people, not just for now but for

the future also. Bharat prayed that the Lord would provide a solution. He prayed for a way to protect his people.

One day, young Sage Bharadwaj visited the emperor. Bharat immediately welcomed the sage, seating him on the throne and washing Bharadwaj's feet. Bharat gently asked what he could do to serve the sage.



“Emperor,” Bharadwaj said. “I come here on a delicate mission. I wish to perform a *yajna* to increase the land’s spiritual merit.”

“I’m honored that you came to me,” Bharat said. “My treasury shall pay for all the expenses of the *yajna*.”

“Emperor, may the Almighty bless you for your generosity and yet I sense sadness in you. What is the reason for your sorrow?”

Bharat bowed his head. "Great Sage, I worry for my people's future. None of my sons is worthy of the throne."

"Do not grieve, Emperor," Bharadwaj said. "I have come here, carried by the wind, to help you solve this problem."

Bharat looked up, hope rising in his eyes.

"The *yajna* will grant me a son," Bharadwaj said, "and that son shall be just like you."

Bharat threw himself into organizing the *yajna*, inviting Pundits from all over the empire to assist. He donated vast sums, fed the masses that came to the festivities, and welcomed leaders from all over the empire to share in the event.

Sage Bharadwaj performed the *yajna* with great care. As he had predicted, a son was granted to him named Bhumanyu. Bharat's wife, Sunanda, took care of the baby boy and as Bhumanyu became older, Bharadwaj taught the child everything he knew of the Vedas.

Bharat watched the boy grow up, anxious to see if what Bharadwaj had said was true. He saw that Bhumanyu was kind yet strong, making friends wherever he went and subduing enemies with calmness and friendship. He was intelligent and learned many of the cultures of the empire, finding joy in sharing knowledge. He learned the Vedas from Bharadwaj and had great faith in the Lord, always taking part in spiritual activities like *yajnas* and *kathas*. He was eager to serve and always asked for ways in which he could help others. True to Bharadwaj's word, Bhumanyu was just like Bharat. He even looked like Bharat because he was as tall, as powerfully built, and just as handsome.

Bharat was now an old man. His people had asked him over and over again which of his sons would be king. They didn't like any of his sons but it was tradition that one of the princes would inherit. They looked longingly at Bhumanyu.

On the day that Bharat was to announce his heir, he rose from his throne and proclaimed to his court that he would adopt Bhumanyu, son of Bharadwaj. Bhumanyu would inherit and be king.

His people were stunned. They'd never imagined that Bharat would cut out his own blood sons, all nine of them! They'd never imagined that he would instead give the entire empire to Bhumanyu. And yet, they realized almost immediately how correct Bharat was to do this. He was giving them a king worthy of the throne. He was giving them who they really wanted. He cared about his people so much that, to protect them, he was willing to pass the throne to someone who wasn't even his own blood.

Bharat became even more beloved to his people through this act. Long after Bharat retired to the forest to meditate for the rest of his days, Bhumanyu and his descendants were named the Bharat and Kuru clan by the people. They were called this because they followed Bharat's ideals and values. They cared more about the people than about themselves. They sacrificed their own lives to ensure their people lived in peace. They nurtured spiritual harmony through the land, paving the way for dharma to grow.

Bhumanyu's son Suhotra had Bhumanyu's noble qualities and when it was time for Bhumanyu to retire the people were happy to see Suhotra inherit the throne. And Suhotra's son, Hastin, was selected next to be king. Hastin had such support from his people that he built the city of Hastinapur on the banks of the Ganga river and that beautiful city became the capital of the Bharat clan.

The land of Bharat overflowed with fortune and friendship because the ideal of leadership was not in who someone's father was. It was their qualities and capabilities that proved their worth. They had to care about the people, be just and true, and protect their nation from corruption at all costs.

For generations, the Bharat descendants ensured that the people were happy, prosperous, and spiritually rich.



4. Shantanu and Ganga

King Shantanu, a Bharat descendent, ruled in Hastinapur. His people were happy and prosperous, and he ruled them in peace like his ancestors before him.

One day, the king was riding his chariot along the banks of the river Ganga. The day was bright, the sky clear, and a gentle breeze blew his hair behind him. In the distance he saw a lady with cream-colored skin standing by the water. She wore a white sari with gems at her throat and ears. As he drew closer and she looked towards him, Shantanu saw her dark liquid eyes.

He halted his chariot. "Who are you?" he breathed.

"I am Ganga," she said, and Shantanu knew she was *Devi* Ganga, the sacred river, daughter of Lord Brahma himself.

Shantanu alighted and strode to her. "I am King Shantanu of Hastinapur and I'm in love with you, *Devi* Ganga. Will you marry me and be my queen?"

She looked down shyly. "Yes," she said, "but only on one condition. You must never stop my actions or question them. Ever. The moment you do I will leave you."

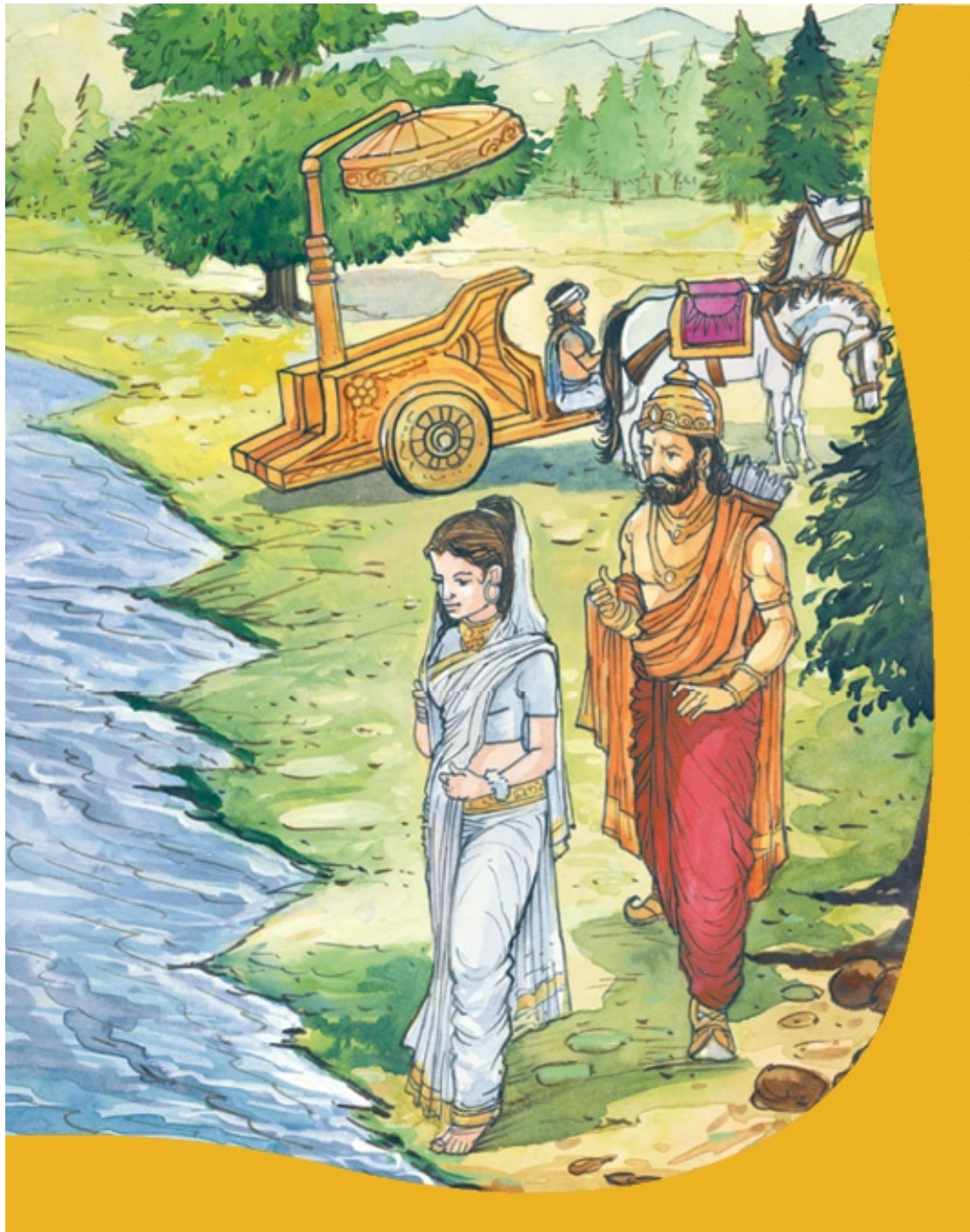
He didn't hesitate. "I agree. I swear that I won't ever stop your actions or

question them.”

“Think again,” she warned him. “A wise man is not so quick to make decisions.”

“I’ll agree to anything to marry you,” he said.

Thus Ganga and Shantanu married and Shantanu was so in love with his wife that he left the running of the kingdom to his prime minister and spent all his time with Ganga. His advisers were worried but thought the situation would go back to normal after some time. After a year Shantanu and Ganga had a baby boy. Shantanu was so happy he opened up his treasury to the people and donated thousands of cows to the Pundits. The streets burst with color and music as the people danced and cheered to celebrate the birth of the prince.



Shantanu was standing at his balcony, taking a moment alone to bask in his happiness. Ganga was resting and he wanted her to sleep. Then from the corner of his eye he saw a flicker of something. He turned to see his wife dressed and leaving the palace, carrying the baby with her. Wondering why she was out of bed, Shantanu followed her.

She walked to the riverbank and he saw her stop. She looked down at the baby in her arms and tenderly stroked his head. Shantanu's heart melted with love

for them both. He was about to move forward and embrace her when Ganga lowered their swaddled baby into the water and let go.

Shantanu jerked but thought Ganga would lift the baby out. Instead, she simply stood as their son sank from sight. Shantanu ran to the river's edge and thrust his hands into the water but there was nothing. His son was gone, carried away by the secret currents of the Ganga.

Ganga turned, noticing Shantanu there. He stared up at her, suddenly remembering the condition of their marriage. He had vowed to never question or stop her actions. Ever.

She smiled at him as if nothing had happened. Then she turned and calmly walked to the palace.

Shantanu stumbled after her, numb inside. He followed Ganga to her chamber where she sat on her bed. He continued to stare at her but she said nothing. Her maids were silent with horror, having seen from the windows what the queen had done.

Shantanu wept for days and weeks. He couldn't ask why she'd done this and she never told him.

The kingdom was full of the appalling news. His people questioned what kind of mother Ganga was that she would do this to her baby. His people questioned what kind of father Shantanu was that he allowed it.

Ganga had another boy a year later and again, she went to the riverbank. Again, Shantanu followed. He watched her drown their second son, his limbs and mind seized with grief. But he couldn't stop her. If he did then she would leave him and he couldn't bear to lose her.

They had five more sons and Ganga drowned them all. Shantanu didn't celebrate their births, he only followed her, grieving for what was about to happen. As Ganga lowered their eighth son down to the cream-colored water, Shantanu couldn't take it anymore.

"Stop!" He grabbed the baby from her arms. "Why do you do this, Ganga? *Why?*"

She looked sad for the first time since he'd known her. "Now I'll have to leave

you, Great King.”

“But why do you do this?”

“I had to. I promised I would save them from the curse.”

He blinked. “What?”

Ganga sighed. “Eight celestials played a prank on a sage by stealing his cows. When the cows were hurt, the sage cursed the celestials that they would all be born on earth and live through great suffering. Terrified, they came to me. They made me promise to be their mother and that as soon as they were born I would drown them.”

Shantanu stuttered, “They were cursed?”

“They were all cursed. But it looks like this last son won’t escape it,” she said, touching the baby’s tender cheek. “He will have to accept his fate.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“If I’d told you then you wouldn’t have let me fulfill my promise to them. Even now you stop me and I must leave you.”

Shantanu froze. “No. No wait. Ganga, you can’t leave me. I didn’t know! I love you!”

“I know you love me but that is not enough. You broke your vow.” She took the baby from his arms. “I will have our son educated in the celestial realm. I have named him Devavrat.”

“Ganga, wait!”

She whispered: “I will return our son to you when he has finished his education.”

She walked into the river, the water sliding around her but not making her wet. She held Devavrat in the safe cocoon of her arms and walked deeper, until Shantanu couldn’t see her anymore.

Sixteen years past. Many nights Shantanu would walk the banks of the river and stare out at the water, hoping for a glimpse of his wife. He watched other fathers playing with their sons and was sad because he had never played with his son.

Then one day, as he walked the riverbank, a handsome teenage boy came running over the ridge towards him. "Mother, Mother!" the boy yelled, waving a bow in the air. "Did you see how fast I was? Did you see?"

Ganga came walking up behind him. "I saw, my son. You did very well."

Shantanu stood there, frozen.

Ganga saw him. She put her arm around Devavrat's shoulders and brought him to Shantanu. "My lord," she said in greeting. "My son," she said to Devavrat, "this is your father."

Devavrat opened his eyes wide. He dropped to his knees and bowed before his father, trembling with emotion.

Shantanu lifted the boy up and embraced him. "I have missed you so much!"

"Devavrat is educated in all subjects—politics, science, mathematics, writing, scriptures, warfare, weaponry, art, music, philosophy. He has studied under Great Sage Parashuram himself."

"He is perfect whatever he has studied," Shantanu said, kissing Devavrat's forehead. "I'm so glad you're home."

"Devavrat, you must serve your father with all your knowledge and skill and power. You must serve the people of the kingdom. That is your dharma," Ganga told him. "I will leave you here."

Devavrat looked at his mother with alarm. "You're not coming with us?"

"No, my son. You will stay with your father now. Whenever you wish to see me, simply come to my riverbank and I will appear."

Shantanu wanted to stop her, to make her stay with him and their son but he knew he could not. He'd broken his vow to her.

She turned and walked into the river, disappearing into the secret depths.

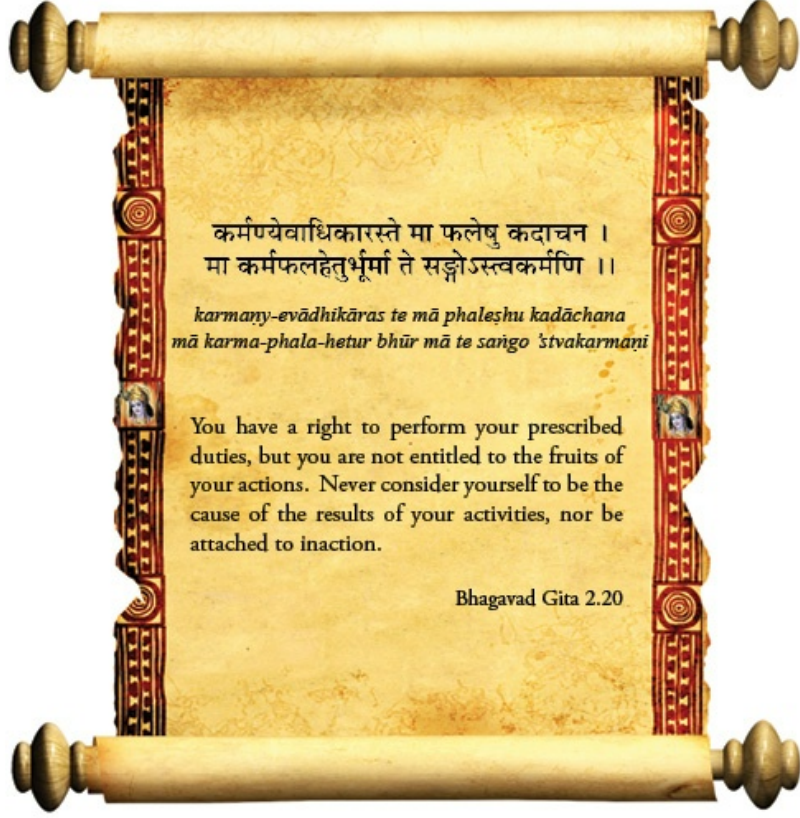
Shantanu sighed and Devavrat looked at the ground, silent tears running down his face. Shantanu put his arm around his son and tried to console him. "What are you thinking about?" he asked the boy.

"I'm thinking how unlucky I am." Devavrat said. "Other children get to have

both their parents but when I had my mother I didn't have my father. And now that I have my father, I can't have my mother."

"We both love you, Devavrat," Shantanu said. "Never doubt that."

"I know you both love me," Devavrat said. "But it's not enough."



कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

*karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmani*

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.

Bhagavad Gita 2.20



5. Devavrat becomes Bheeshma

Shantanu took Devavrat to Hastinapur. He found that Devavrat was intelligent, patient, diplomatic, and a skilled politician. He impressed all the members of Shantanu's court. When it came to training, Devavrat would beat anyone. He was an expert at everything—riding, shooting, swimming, wrestling. He loved science and could debate philosophy with the most enlightened sages.

The people clamored for Devavrat to become the heir to the throne. Shantanu was thrilled to hear it. He couldn't suggest it because in the tradition of the Bharat clan, the people had to decide who was worthy of the throne. When they asked for Devavrat to be heir, he consented and they anointed Devavrat as the crown prince. Shantanu was at peace, knowing that when he retired, his son would be king and would safeguard the people of Hastinapur.

There was only one thing that marred Shantanu's happiness and that was the absence of Ganga. He still loved her. Often Devavrat would go to the riverbank to see her but Shantanu never went with him. Shantanu knew that if he was there, she would not appear.

One time, Shantanu and Devavrat went on a camping trip. They spent peaceful days in the forest, enjoying the beauty of nature around them. Early

one morning in the camp, Shantanu woke and decided to go for a ride. He took only his charioteer and rode to the shore of the Yamuna river. There, sitting next to a little boat on the riverbank was a beautiful woman. She was dark-skinned and long-limbed and she held oars so she obviously ferried passengers across the river in her little raft.

Shantanu didn't know why but he got down from his chariot and went to her. "Will you ferry me across the river?"

She looked up. "Yes," she said, standing.

He helped her push the boat into the water and got in as she settled opposite him. After some minutes of her watching her row, Shantanu asked what her name was.

"Satyavati," she said.

"My name is Shantanu," he told her. She gave him a little smile and just like that they were talking to each other, discussing the river, the forest, the people, the animals, the best nights for rowing. He told her all about his son and his court and she told him all about her life as the daughter of a fisherman, the sages she met, the travelers she rowed across the river. Shantanu, to his amazement, was so comfortable with her. For the first time since Ganga had left him, Shantanu felt as if he could talk to someone and not have to hide his feelings or his loneliness.

All too soon they reached the opposite bank but Shantanu didn't want to get out of the boat. He was in love with Satyavati. He'd never loved any lady but Ganga, but now he felt all those feelings again. "I would like to marry you," he told her softly.

She gasped.

"Would you like to marry me?" he asked.

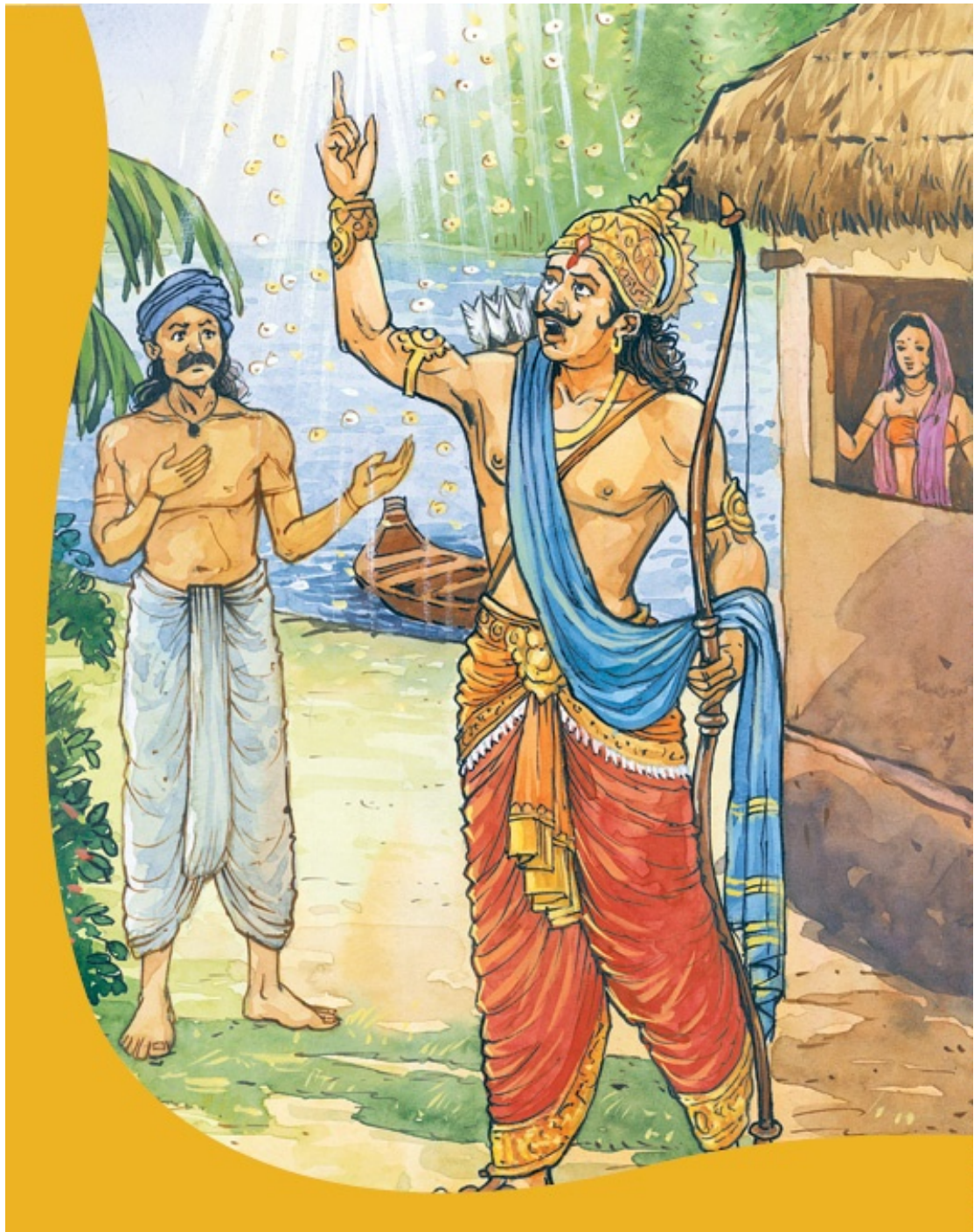
When she didn't say anything, Shantanu looked down at the lashed bamboo of the boat. *She doesn't want to marry me. I shouldn't have asked*, he thought.

"Yes," she whispered.

He looked up in surprise.

She gave him a radiant smile.

“Where is your father? I will ask his permission.”



She explained that her father was the chief of the fishermen and that their hut was close by. Shantanu pulled the boat onto the bank for her and followed as she led the way home.

The fisherman was sitting outside his hut, mending a net. When he saw Satyawati approaching with the tall, handsome man dressed in royal clothes, he stood and invited Shantanu to sit beside him. Satyawati went inside and returned from the hut with two cups of sweet guava juice. Shantanu thanked

her for it.

“Go inside, Satyavati,” her father told her.

Bewildered by her father’s abrupt order, she went and stood just inside the doorway of the hut, peering out at the two men.

Shantanu took a deep breath. “I came to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage. I am King of Hastinapur and if you approve then I will make her my queen.”

The fisherman smiled. “I thought so. I’ll give you my permission but on one condition that only her son may inherit the throne.”

Shantanu’s lips parted in dismay. Devavrat was the heir. Only Devavrat could be king. “I cannot agree to that,” Shantanu finally said. “The people have chosen their heir.”

“Then my daughter may not marry you. It’s been foretold that she will be the mother of kings so even if you don’t marry her then some other king will ask for her hand.”

Shantanu’s heart squeezed at the thought of Satyavati married to another. He looked at her standing in the doorway and the horror on her face was clear. She was appalled at what her father was saying. Shantanu wanted to take her far away from this horrid man but how could he give Devavrat’s inheritance to another? And besides, he’d agreed to a condition with Ganga and lost seven sons for it. He would never do that again. Shantanu took his leave of the fisherman, looked once more at Satyavati, and walked away.

Back in the camp, he went to his tent and stayed in there alone. Devavrat asked him what was wrong. “Nothing, my son.” Shantanu said, before going to sleep. The next morning, he took a horse and went riding alone. After an entire day, he rode back to camp. He went into his tent and wouldn’t eat or drink or talk.

Devavrat was worried about his father. He asked the king’s charioteer and the charioteer led the crown prince to Satyavati’s home. The fisherman was sitting outside the hut, enjoying the night air. When Devavrat asked him why King Shantanu had been there, the fisherman told him the whole story. Devavrat asked: “Does your daughter want to marry my father?”

“She says she loves him,” the fisherman replied, shrugging.

Devavrat glanced at the pretty lady and saw tears in her eyes. He understood his father’s sadness now. Sometimes late at night, Devavrat had seen his father walking along the banks of the Ganga river, obviously hoping for a glimpse of Ganga herself. But she never appeared to Shantanu and Devavrat knew she never would.

Devavrat adored his father. He’d never seen Shantanu get angry, or lose patience, or make a bad judgment. Shantanu never even complained about being alone. How could Devavrat let his father be lonely now, when Shantanu finally had a chance to be happy?

“I will agree to your condition,” he told the fisherman. “Satyavati’s son will be king.”

The fisherman shook his head. “Not good enough. How do I know your children won’t challenge hers for the throne? There’ll be civil war.”

“What if I teach my children not to covet the throne?” Devavrat said.

“Still not good enough. Your children might not listen to you. Or the people themselves could revolt in your name. Anything could go wrong.”

“Fine,” Devavrat said. He stood. “Then I vow to never become king and to serve whoever sits on the throne as if they were my father himself. I vow to never marry and be celibate all my life.”

From out of the clear sky there was a crack of thunder and suddenly flowers rained on Devavrat. “Bless you! Bless you!” the *devatas* called down to him.

The fisherman was staring up at the sky, his mouth open in awe but his awe turned to a smug smile. “Good,” he told Devavrat. “You may take my daughter with you now.”

Devavrat politely gestured for her to step onto his chariot and she complied, a stunned look on her face. They rode in silence for a few minutes until Satyavati asked Devavrat to halt the chariot. When they were stopped, Satyavati kneeled and touched Devavrat’s feet.

He sucked in his breath. “What are you doing?”

“When we reach camp I will be your mother. Before that happens I want to tell you how much I respect you. You have made a great and terrible sacrifice for your father.”

“It is nothing-”

“Yes it is,” she said. “You’ve given up all material desires for him. You have even given up any hope for a wife and children, which any man deserves. The *devatas* themselves have showered you with flowers. You shouldn’t be called Devavrat. You should be called Bheeshma because you are a man of great vows.”

“You may call me whatever you like, Mother.”

“If all men were like you,” she said, “the whole world would be enlightened.”

They rode on in silence and alighted before the king’s tent, the soldiers looking at Satyavati curiously. They entered the king’s tent and Shantanu looked up from his throne. He blinked at Satyavati, then at his son. “What is going on?”

“I brought this lady for you to marry.”

“What?” Shantanu asked, dazed.

“I met her father’s condition by vowing to never be king.”

“What? No!” Shantanu grabbed Devavrat and shook him. “That’s not what I wanted!”

“Father, it’s done.”

“But what about the people! We are the Bharat clan! How can we give the throne to one not worthy?”

“I will teach Satyavati’s sons,” Devavrat said. “They will be worthy.”

“No. Take her back.”

“Then my vows will be meaningless but I’ll never break them, regardless.”

Shantanu froze. “Vows? You made more than one vow?”

“I vowed to never marry so I will never have any children to challenge for the

throne.”

Shantanu collapsed onto a seat. He blamed himself. He should never have wanted to marry again. He should never have loved Satyawati.

Devavrat left the tent and Satyawati came to the king. She told him of how the *devatas* had blessed Devavrat. She told him how his son had done this for him so Shantanu would be happy. There was only one thing to do, she told the king, to honor Devavrat’s sacrifice.

Shantanu realized that she was right and they married but even years later, watching his two younger sons playing with Devavrat, Shantanu felt ashamed of loving Satyawati. He’d done a great injustice to his people.

Devavrat was now known throughout the kingdom as Bheeshma, respected as a pure selfless man.

Before Shantanu died, he blessed Bheeshma with the ability to choose the moment of his own death, so that even if the heir was not worthy of the throne, Bheeshma could live on and safeguard the kingdom.

Bheeshma then made a third vow. He pledged that he would not die until he saw Hastinapur safe in the hands of a worthy king. Shantanu embraced him and said that with the power of his father’s blessing, it would be so.



6. Bheeshma and Amba

King Shantanu died while his two sons with Satyawati were still young. Bheeshma had the eldest, Chitrangad, crowned king and Chitrangad listened closely to Bheeshma's counsel. The kingdom was prosperous and peaceful and the people were happy. It was only an unfortunate battle that caused Chitrangad to die so young.

Bheeshma then had his youngest brother, Vichitravirya, crowned king. But Vichitravirya, while handsome and noble-natured, was sickly, and couldn't travel long distances.

When Bheeshma heard that the king of Kashi was holding a *swayamvar* ceremony for his three daughters, a gathering where the princesses would choose their own husbands, Bheeshma decided that he would go as Vichitravirya's representative.

However, the king of Kashi held a grudge against Hastinapur for a dispute long forgotten by everyone else. He decided to insult the Bharat clan by not inviting Vichitravirya to the *swayamvar*. When Bheeshma heard of this, he was enraged at the insult to his brother. He went to Kashi and defeated all the kings there, even the king of Shalva, who pursued him and fought for the princesses. Bheeshma defeated the king of Shalva and rode home with all

three princesses to Hastinapur.

The eldest princess, Amba, was heartbroken. She'd already decided that she wanted to marry the king of Shalva, and yet here she was in Hastinapur. When she met Satyavati, the queen mother, Amba broke down and revealed the truth.

Satyavati went straight to Bheeshma and he realized that he had made a grave mistake.

Quickly, Bheeshma arranged for Amba to be escorted to the king of Shalva with all honors, and asked the two younger princesses, Ambika and Ambalika, if they had any other choices for their husbands. Thankfully, they chose Vichitravirya and became queens of Hastinapur.

Amba was escorted to Shalva and she was excited to see the king, knowing that they'd loved each other since before her *swayamvar*. Yet when he saw her, Shalva's king rejected her. He said that he didn't want Bheeshma's prize and Amba fled in disgrace.

She didn't know what to do and the more she thought about her helpless state, the more her fury towards Bheeshma grew. She went to Hastinapur and appeared before the court. "Great King," she said, "because Bheeshma carried me from my *swayamvar* by force the King of Shalva won't marry me. I cannot marry you because you are not my choice and I cannot go home to Kashi because I am disgraced. Even though I had a *swayamvar*, I do not have a husband. Therefore, I demand that Bheeshma marry me and grant me a home."

Vichitravirya looked upon her with sympathy. "Dear lady," he said. "I'm sorry for your plight. Yet just as Bheeshma could not force you to marry me, I cannot force Bheeshma to marry you. It would be against dharma to do so."

"You will allow me to be alone?" she asked. "Without a home? Without protection?"

Bheeshma stood from his seat next to the king. "Princess Amba," he said, "forgive me but I cannot fulfill your request. I have taken a vow to be celibate."

"If you pledged to be celibate then why did you carry me from my

swayamvar?”

“I said then that I was representing my brother, King Vichitravirya. I never intended to marry anyone.”

“We can find another husband for you,” Vichitravirya said.

“I don’t want another!” she screamed. “I want Bheeshma!”

Bheeshma crossed his arms. “My lady, forgive me, but I cannot break my vow.”

Her eyes burning with fury, she climbed the dais to face him. “You’re a fool to not fear my anger, Bheeshma.” She pointed at him. “I vow before the King of Hastinapur and his court that I will be the cause of your death. Though I am just a helpless woman with no home, I will do this. I *will* have my vengeance against you!” Turning from him, she swept from the court.

Bheeshma knew he would see her again. He was at fault yet his dharma was to protect Hastinapur and that was why he’d taken his vows. He wondered when he would have to pay the price for this wrong.

Amba went to the forest to take shelter with the sages. There, by chance, she met Sage Parashuram and told him of how Bheeshma had humiliated her.

Parashuram was Bheeshma’s guru and he was outraged to hear this about his own student. He went to Hastinapur and ordered Bheeshma to marry Amba. Again, Bheeshma refused, explaining his vow of celibacy. Parashuram did not accept his words. “Then face me on the battlefield of Kurukshetra!” he told his disciple.

Bheeshma protested because he didn’t want to fight his own guru but Parashuram was in a rage. “You will fight me!” Parashuram said. “I’ll make you marry Amba.”

They met on the battlefield. When Bheeshma saw that his guru had no chariot, he descended from his own chariot and stood on the ground. “Gurudev,” he said, “I am only here because you ordered me to be here. I do not wish to fight you. You are my guru and I am your humble servant.”

“If you were so humble,” Parashuram snapped, “you would never have committed this wrong to Amba!”

Bheeshma hung his head. It was true and yet he had to keep his vow of celibacy. His vow protected Hastinapur from civil war.

Bheeshma walked across the battlefield and kneeled at Parashuram's feet. "I ask permission to fight you, Gurudev."

Parashuram lifted his hand to bless him. "I grant you permission and I bless you also. You were always my favorite student, Devavrat."

Amba had come with the other sages to the battlefield to watch the fight. She was grateful that Parashuram defended her honor and she knew that when he defeated Bheeshma, Bheeshma would marry her.

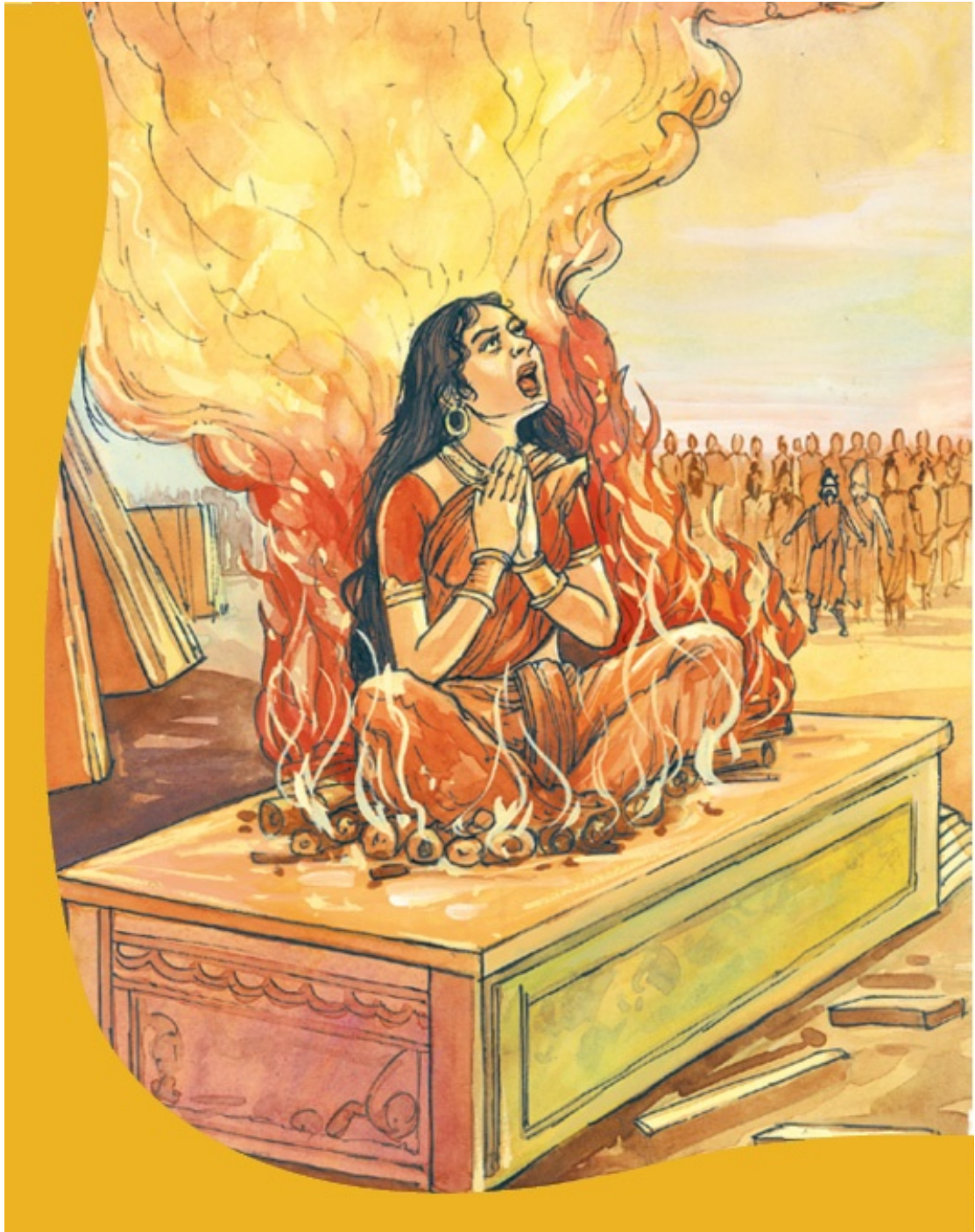
Bheeshma returned to his position and the fight between guru and disciple began. The force of their arrows was so blinding that Amba and the sages could see only the dust that flew and the explosions that made deep craters in the earth. Parashuram fought with fire and Bheeshma fought with ice. They caused the skies to thunder and the ground to tremble.

The sages explained the weapons being used to Amba. Parashuram had many divine weapons but Bheeshma countered them, attacking with his own divine arrows. The battle lasted for twenty-three days, beginning at dawn and ceasing at dusk each day. They wounded each other with vicious blows, causing each other to fall unconscious from blood loss and pain. Still, they could not vanquish each other.

Finally, Bheeshma took out *Pashupatastra*, Lord Shiv's infallible weapon that Bheeshma knew his guru did not have. Bheeshma aimed the weapon, about to say the mantra to release it.

Then a deep voice spoke from the sky above them. "Bheeshma, stop."

Everyone jumped, looking up. There was no one there except an oracle's voice. "Do not use this weapon against your guru. It is too powerful and will humiliate him. You have already won this battle."



Bheeshma held *Pashupatastra*. He looked across the battlefield at his guru and saw Parashuram standing proud.

“I won’t retreat,” Parashuram said, “so either kill me or leave this battlefield.”

Bheeshma lowered his weapon. He bowed to his guru and turned away, riding back to Hastinapur.

Amba ran to Sage Parashuram. He shook his head. “There’s nothing more I

can do, my dear,” Parashuram told her. “Bheeshma has won.”

She wept bitter tears, seeing now that she couldn’t rely on others. She went back to the forest and performed severe austerities for years to please Lord Shiv. When he appeared, she said only this: “I ask for a body that can kill Bheeshma.”

Lord Shiv’s expression was gentle. “My child,” he told her, “this pursuit of vengeance will only destroy you. Give it up and live in peace, Amba.”

“There is no peace for me,” Amba said. “Not until Bheeshma is dead. Do you grant me my boon, Lord, or will you also let me down like everyone else?”

Lord Shiv shook his head. “My daughter, if I bestow this boon then you will have to surrender the body you have now.”

“Willingly,” she said. Standing, Amba went to the *yajna* pit where sages performed sacred rites for the good of the world. The fire was burning and Amba walked to its edge.

“Think once more, Amba,” Shiv told her. “Even if you were to kill Bheeshma, the King of Shalva will not love you. You won’t even be yourself anymore.”

“I don’t care about love or myself,” Amba said. “I only care about vengeance.”

Lord Shiv sighed in defeat. “So be it.”

Amba stepped into the flames, burning herself in the fire of revenge.

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः ।
वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ॥

*duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ sukhēṣhu vigata-sprīhaḥ
vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ sthita-dhīr munir uchyate*

One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a sage of steady wisdom.

Bhagavad Gita 2.56



7. Satyavati and Vyas

Vichitravirya was a good king. He was patient in court judgments, cautious in diplomacy, and sensible in business. He sought to make the people happy and listened to Bheeshma's wise counsel each day. He also had a happy married life. He was careful to treat his two wives, Ambika and Ambalika, equally, so neither felt jealous or unloved.

Yet Vichitravirya's sickly body was his curse. One day, he just didn't wake up and Hastinapur went into mourning for the king they'd loved so well.

In the palace, Satyavati wept for her youngest son. She had already lost Chitrangad and now her youngest was gone. She saw her children's deaths as punishment for what her father had done to Bheeshma. She called Bheeshma to her and told him to renounce his vows. He must be king and marry Ambika and Ambalika because Vichitravirya had left no heirs.

Bheeshma refused. Had he rejected Amba and left her all alone in the world, only to break his vows now? "No," he said. "I won't do it."

"But Hastinapur must have an heir!" Satyavati told him.

"Find another way," Bheeshma said. "The Bharat clan has found other ways before."

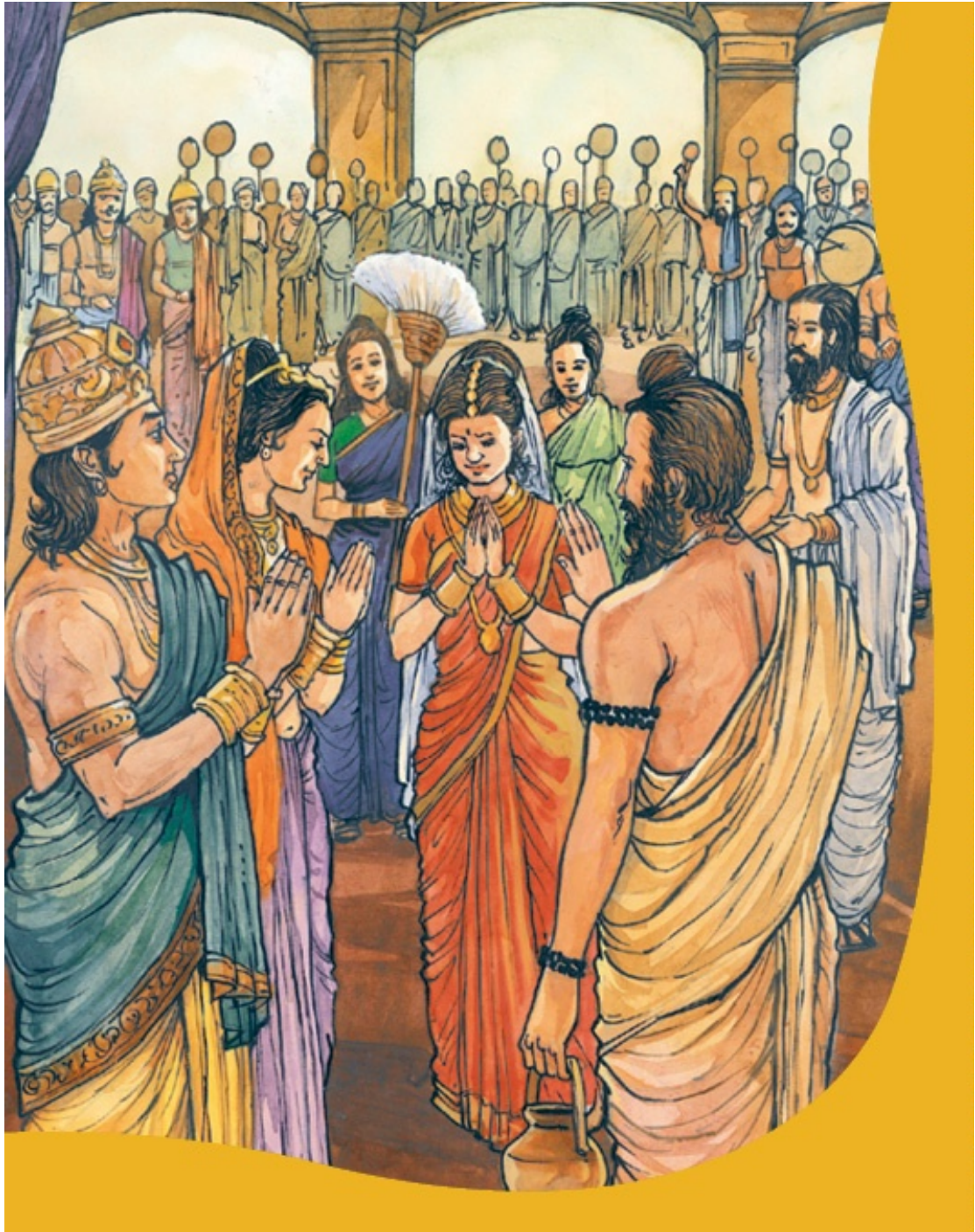
In desperation, Satyavati thought of Sage Vyas and Vyas appeared instantly in her chamber. Bheeshma gasped but Satyavati only stood in respect.

“Why do you stand, Mother?” Vyas asked her.

“Because you are Sage Vyas. I stand in respect for that.”

Bheeshma gaped to hear this talk of Satyavati being Sage Vyas’s mother.

Vyas saw the confusion on Bheeshma’s face and explained. “My father, Sage Parashar, foresaw that he would have a son and that Satyavati would be the mother. He went to her and told her of his vision, saying that their child would benefit humanity. Satyavati wanted to help Parashar but was afraid of what people would think. Parashar explained to Satyavati that these were extraordinary circumstances and that he would never have asked her for this if he did not know how important their son would be. Parashar promised Satyavati that she would remain a virgin and that instead of being blamed by society she would be respected throughout the land. Through his yogic powers Parashar foresaw that a king would later marry her and her sons would be kings.”



“That’s how my father knew a king would marry me,” Satyavati said.

Bheeshma nodded in realization. “So then,” he said to Sage Vyas, “you were born? But who raised you? My father didn’t know of your existence.”

Satyavati said: “My son Vyas grew to adulthood at birth and went to live in the forest with his father. I never had the chance to raise him even though I longed to.”

"I promised you that I would always appear when you needed me, Mother," Vyas reminded her.

"And here you are, my son," Satyavati said. She kissed him on the forehead.

Satyavati and Vyas looked nothing alike. Satyavati was beautiful and looked young even though she was now much older. Vyas was ugly and looked old, even though he was still a young man. The only trait they shared was dark skin.

Satyavati told Vyas: "Your brother Vichitravirya died without an heir and there is no one to be king. Bheeshma is bound by his vows but you are a sage. You can bless Vichitravirya's wives with children who will be worthy of the throne."

Vyas frowned. "Whether the heir will be worthy is in the Almighty's hands. I can only try but I will fulfill your request in a year's time, Mother."

"A year? No, it must be done now!"

"Mother, you don't understand. At present I have taken vows of great austerity. Due to that my form is ugly and my brother's wives will be frightened of me. In a year, I'll have fulfilled my vows and will be much better able to meet your request."

Satyavati shook her head. "Hastinapur doesn't have a year, my son. Without an heir the people are vulnerable. You must do as I ask now."

"Very well, Mother."

She immediately took Vyas to a chamber made ready for him. "Wait here. I shall send Ambika."

Satyavati hurried to her daughter-in-laws' quarters and found them both sitting together. "I have good news for you. Sage Vyas has agreed to bless you with children. Ambika, you are eldest so you go first."

The queens gaped up at the queen mother. "Truly?" Ambika said.

"Truly. Go."

Ambika went to Vyas's chamber. She took one look at him and almost ran away. He was wild and ugly, with dirty dreadlocks and grimy hands. How

could this person bless her with a child? Yet Mother Satyavati had said he would and Ambika knew she must provide Hastinapur with an heir. Determined to have a son, she closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at Vyas.

Satyavati waited in her own chamber, anxious to know what news Vyas would bring her.

He arrived at her door looking grim, his eyes downcast. "Ambika will have a strong and intelligent son."

Satyavati jumped up. "Then why do you look sad?"

"She closed her eyes upon seeing me. Her son will be born blind because of it."

Satyavati gasped. "Blind?" she whispered. "A king cannot be blind." She put her head in her hands and wept until finally, she pulled herself together. "Go and rest," she told Vyas. "When I send Ambalika to you, she will not close her eyes."

Ambalika obeyed. Her sister had warned her that the sage was terrible to look upon but even knowing that she was still horrified when she saw him. He was dirty and he smelled! Remembering Satyavati's orders, Ambalika did not close her eyes but she turned pale from fear.

Satyavati paced her chamber, waiting for Vyas to give news. He appeared, looking less grim than the day before. Her heart rose with hope. "A son?"

He nodded. "He will be noble, with sharp vision."

"Yes!" Satyavati raised her hands in triumph. "Let us thank the Almighty."

"Mother, wait," Vyas said. "Ambalika turned pale and almost fainted before me. Her son will be sickly and weak."

Satyavati stared at Vyas, her joy draining away. Vichitravirya had been sickly too. He'd died so young. "How long will I be punished for what my father did to Bheeshma?" she wailed.

"It's not your fault, Mother. This was destined."

"There must be something we can do! Can you not bless them again?"

"It would be futile—"

“Try. Just once more, my son. For Hastinapur.”

He agreed and Satyawati told her daughters-in-law to choose between them who would go to Vyas once more.

Ambika and Ambalika talked in private. They agreed that there was no way they could face him again. They decided to send their trusted maid instead to represent them.

The maid was afraid of Sage Vyas from the way the queens had described him. To comfort herself, she chanted Lord Vishnu’s name. Vyas heard her chanting as she entered his chamber and he smiled at her. His smile was gentle and the maid wondered what the queens had found frightening about Vyas. He radiated wisdom and kindness.

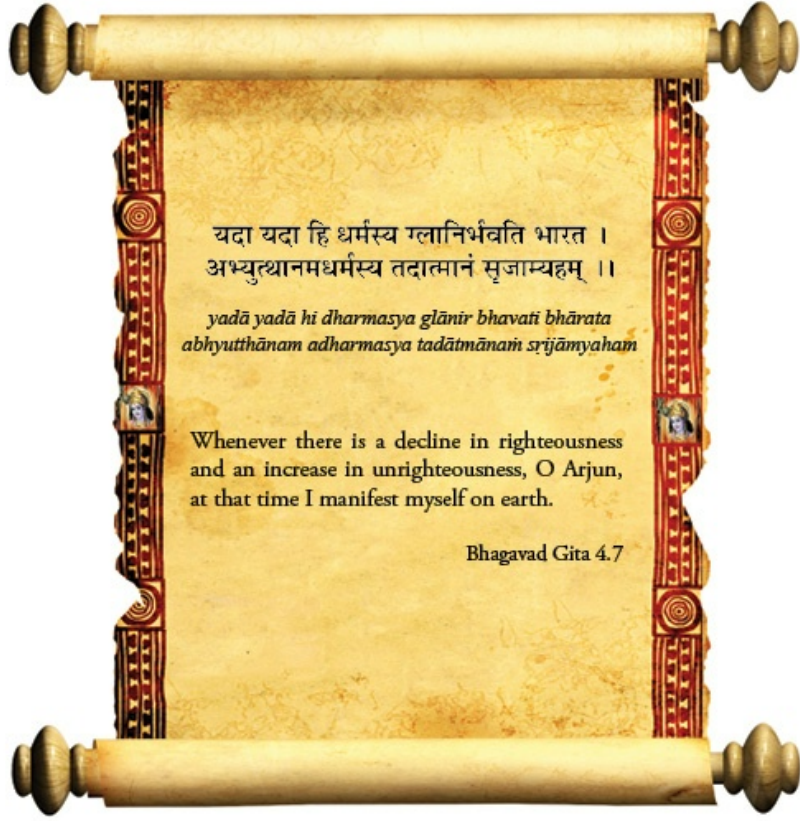
Satyavati was again waiting in her chamber, pacing the carpet, when Vyas appeared. “What news?” she demanded to know.

“The queens sent their maid to me.”

She was outraged. “The maid!”

“Don’t be angry with them, Mother. It’s good news. The maid chanted Lord Vishnu’s name and thus she shall have a son who is perfect in every way. He will be intelligent, healthy, kind and will always speak the truth. He will aid his brothers in ruling Hastinapur.”

Satyavati listened with half joy, half sorrow. Why couldn’t her own daughters-in-law have been like this wise maid? They had not chanted the Almighty’s name. “The three boys will be raised together,” she told Vyas. “Three brothers for Hastinapur.”



यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmyaham*

Whenever there is a decline in righteousness
and an increase in unrighteousness, O Arjun,
at that time I manifest myself on earth.

Bhagavad Gita 4.7



8. The Princes become Men

Vyas returned to the forest.

The two queens and their maid were all pregnant. Ambika's son was born first. Just as Vyas predicted, he was blind but strong. The palace resounded with his wails. He was named Dhritarashtra which meant "one who held the kingdom."

Ambalika then gave birth to a son. The child was weak but smiled the moment he looked up at his mother's face. He was named Pandu for his pale color.

The maid then gave birth. Her son's skin was flush with health, his eyes were open and looking around the room as if he already knew everyone in it. Satyawati went to the birthing chamber and gave strict instructions that he and his mother were to be taken good care of because the future of Hastinapur depended on him. He was named Vidur, meaning "wise."

Satyavati gave Bheeshma the responsibility of raising the babies. With no other father for the children, Bheeshma became their father and he loved them as if they were his own. They also loved him and they called him "*Taat Shree*." Dear Father.

The three brothers were also devoted to each other. They were as close as

brothers could be, with no difference between the two elder boys and Vidur, even though Vidur's mother was only a maid. The three were inseparable.

At a suitable age, Bheeshma removed them from the comfort of their mother's laps and began to educate them. All three were highly intelligent and took to their studies with ease. They became expert in the Vedas, studying the scriptures, ethics, and politics, as all princes should. Bheeshma trained them in athletic skills, archery, mace-fighting, spear-fighting, the sword and shield, horsemanship, battle strategy, and history. He broadened their knowledge in all kinds of fields like music, mathematics, economics, astronomy, art, the Puranas, and different branches of philosophy.

While they were all highly intelligent and skilled in many subjects, Pandu excelled in archery. Despite Pandu's weakness. Bheeshma trained him in ways that strengthened his body and allowed him to fight for long periods of time without stopping. Dhritarashtra was the best in feats of strength. He had exceptional hearing and Bheeshma trained him to pinpoint the location of his enemy and subdue them in a moment. Vidur had no equal in knowledge of scripture and morality. Bheeshma focused on his ability to debate and win any argument.

Bheeshma, trained them with specific positions in mind. Pandu, he taught to defend the kingdom. Vidur, he tutored to become the next prime minister. Dhritarashtra, he equipped to be king, with Pandu and Vidur there to always support him, negating the vulnerability of his blindness. And, of course, Bheeshma himself would always be there to ensure that Hastinapur was safe.

Bheeshma never told Dhritarashtra or either of the others what his plans were but they each guessed anyway.

Dhritarashtra, despite his talents and great strength, always felt inadequate before his brothers. He was the eldest and it was his duty to protect the both of them, yet they were always taking care of him. He looked forward to becoming king so he could fulfill his dharma and not be a burden.

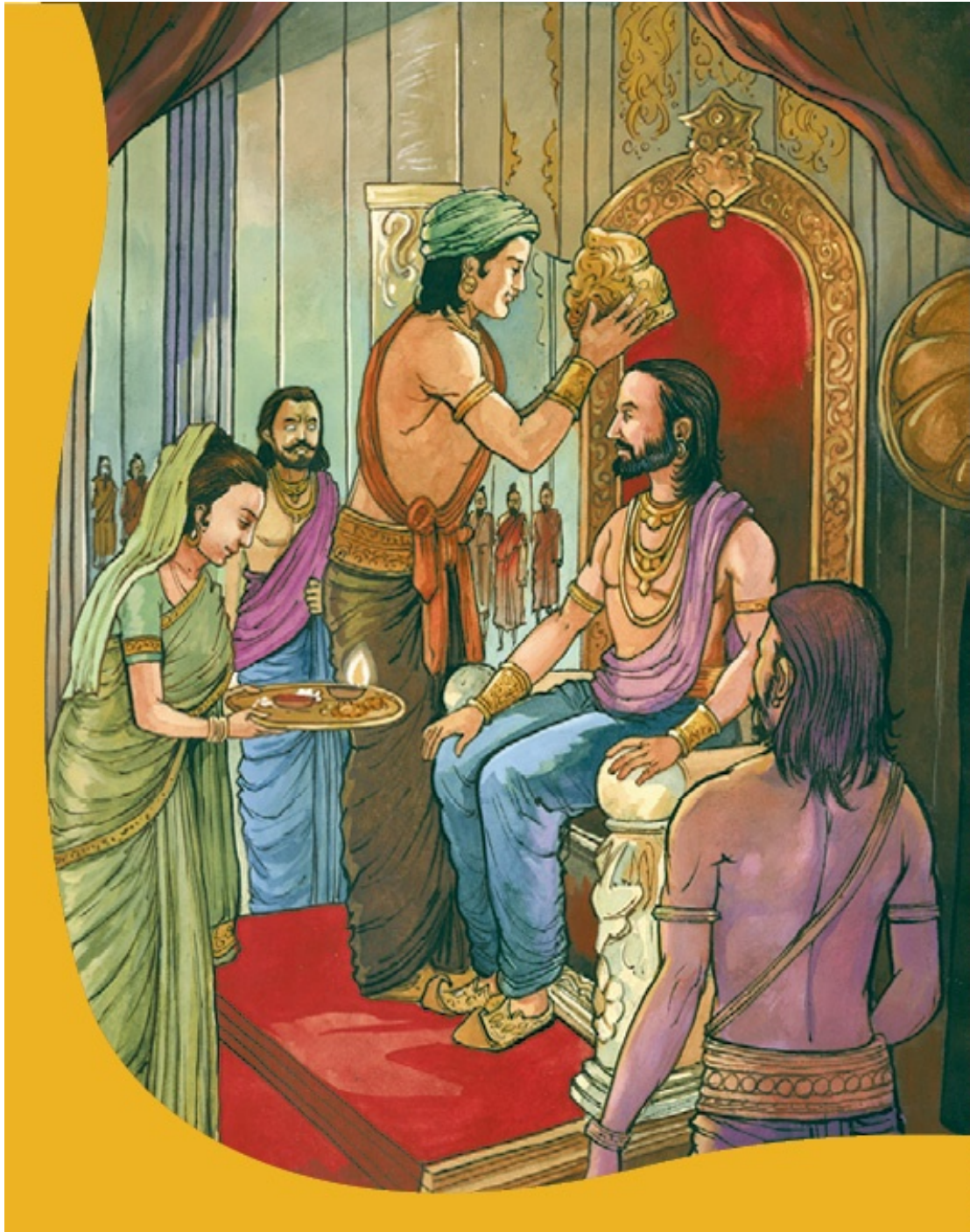
When the princes had completed their studies and were of age to take up the mantle of their responsibilities, Bheeshma took them back to the palace and their mothers.

Satyavati received them in her throne room, flanked by the three mothers

who were thrilled to see their sons once more. There were much kissing and hugging and tears of joy.

Bheeshma explained the talents of each brother and how he had trained them to be worthy of serving Hastinapur. "Mother," Bheeshma said to Satyawati, "it is now time to crown Dhritarashtra king."

Satyawati was about to agree when Vidur stood up. "*Taat Shree*," he said, "that is not correct."



Everyone looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean, my dear?” Satyawati asked him.

Bheeshma saw the certainty on Vidur’s face. He knew what Vidur was about to say because he himself had educated the boy. But Vidur was still inexperienced. He didn’t understand that there were other factors.

“Elder Brother Dhritarashtra should not be crowned king,” Vidur said. “The only one who should be crowned is Pandu.”

“What?” Pandu cried, jumping up from his seat. “I would never usurp my brother’s throne!”

“I would never believe that you would do that,” Dhritarashtra said, laying a calming hand on Pandu’s arm. Pandu sat down again.

“It is not about usurping, Brother Pandu,” Vidur said. He had a calm unflappable way of speaking that compelled others to listen to him. “It is a matter of making the right decision.”

Bheeshma was about to interrupt but Vidur continued.

“The scriptures clearly state that one who has a disability cannot be made king. Elder Brother’s blindness makes him vulnerable to the influence of bad advisors. That could lead Hastinapur to disaster.”

Bheeshma looked at Dhritarashtra who sat silent between Pandu and Vidur. It was only because he knew the boy so well that he saw the secret look of betrayal on Dhritarashtra’s face. Bheeshma knew that if Dhritarashtra was not made king then he would feel like he’d been robbed of his true position. Dhritarashtra would always resent it and who knew what problems that would bring?

Vidur spread his hands in a gesture of openness. “We cannot worry about our egos or who is eldest at a time like this,” he said. “Hastinapur deserves better from us than that. The Bharat clan crowns the one most worthy and most worthy is Brother Pandu. Only Pandu,” Vidur said, looking at Satyawati.

Bheeshma couldn’t argue with that even though he wanted to.

“As Regent, it is your decision, Grandmother,” Vidur said.

Satyavati gazed at Vidur for some moments, then she looked from Dhritarashtra to Pandu. At last, she rose from the throne and descended the dais. She went to Dhritarashtra and kissed him on the forehead. “My beloved grandson,” she whispered.

Then she turned to Pandu. “All glories to the King of Hastinapur.”

Pandu stood, helpless before his grandmother’s decision while Vidur nodded in calm acceptance.

Bheeshma looked at Dhritarashtra and saw the expression of deadness in his eyes. There was nothing Bheeshma could do. Pandu would be king.



9. Gandhari

Pandu was crowned and Dhritarashtra was installed as his chief advisor. Vidur became prime minister as Bheeshma had always intended.

Now that the princes were diligently applying themselves to their tasks, Satyawati and Bheeshma considered finding wives for them.

Since Dhritarashtra was eldest, he needed to be married first. Bheeshma wanted Dhritarashtra to have a wife who would offer comfort and wise counsel. He searched the land for reports of princesses who had such qualities and came upon one who seemed just right.

Gandhari, the princess of Gandhar, was famous among her people for her devotion to Lord Shiv. She was known to be beautiful and wise and was called a lady of clear vision. Considering Dhritarashtra's blindness, she seemed like the perfect complement to him. After discussing it with Satyawati, Bheeshma departed Hastinapur for Gandhar.

Gandhari's father, King Subal of Gandhar, was ecstatic. His spies told him that Bheeshma came to ask for Gandhari's hand for his nephew. An alliance with the mighty Bharat clan of Hastinapur was exactly what Subal wanted because after battling with Hastinapur in previous years and losing many sons in those wars, he knew that the Bharat clan was not to be trifled with. Peace

through marriage would end any conflict.

Subal assumed that Bheeshma was coming for King Pandu and completely forgot about the blind brother Dhritarashtra. Subal made vast preparations to welcome Bheeshma who was impressed by the pomp and celebration. Bheeshma was shown into the king's inner chamber and welcomed there by Subal and Subal's young son, Shakuni, who was crown prince of Gandhar.

Gandhari hid outside her father's chamber, listening in great excitement to the meeting. Her maids had told her that she would be married to the king of Hastinapur! Bheeshma himself came to ask for her hand!

She listened as her father complimented Bheeshma, asking after his journey and offering tasty refreshments. Bheeshma returned the compliments, noting the beauty of the city and the richness of the palace. "Such a daughter of this land will be refined, indeed," Bheeshma said. "King Subal, I come to ask for your daughter's hand for my eldest nephew, Dhritarashtra."

There was a moment of stunned silence. Gandhari was as stunned as her father and brother.

"Why do you ask for blind Dhritarashtra?" Shakuni growled. "Why not for King Pandu?"

"Shakuni!" his father exclaimed but Shakuni stood, snarling.

"My beloved sister is not meant for a disabled man. She is meant for a king!"

Gandhari listened in dawning horror. She loved her brother dearly but a man like Bheeshma couldn't be treated this way. Bheeshma was famous for being pure and selfless. He never asked for anything yet he had asked for Gandhari's hand for Dhritarashtra.

"I will never allow her to marry blind Dhritarashtra!" Shakuni shouted.

Gandhari pushed open the door to her father's chamber. "But I want to marry Dhritarashtra."

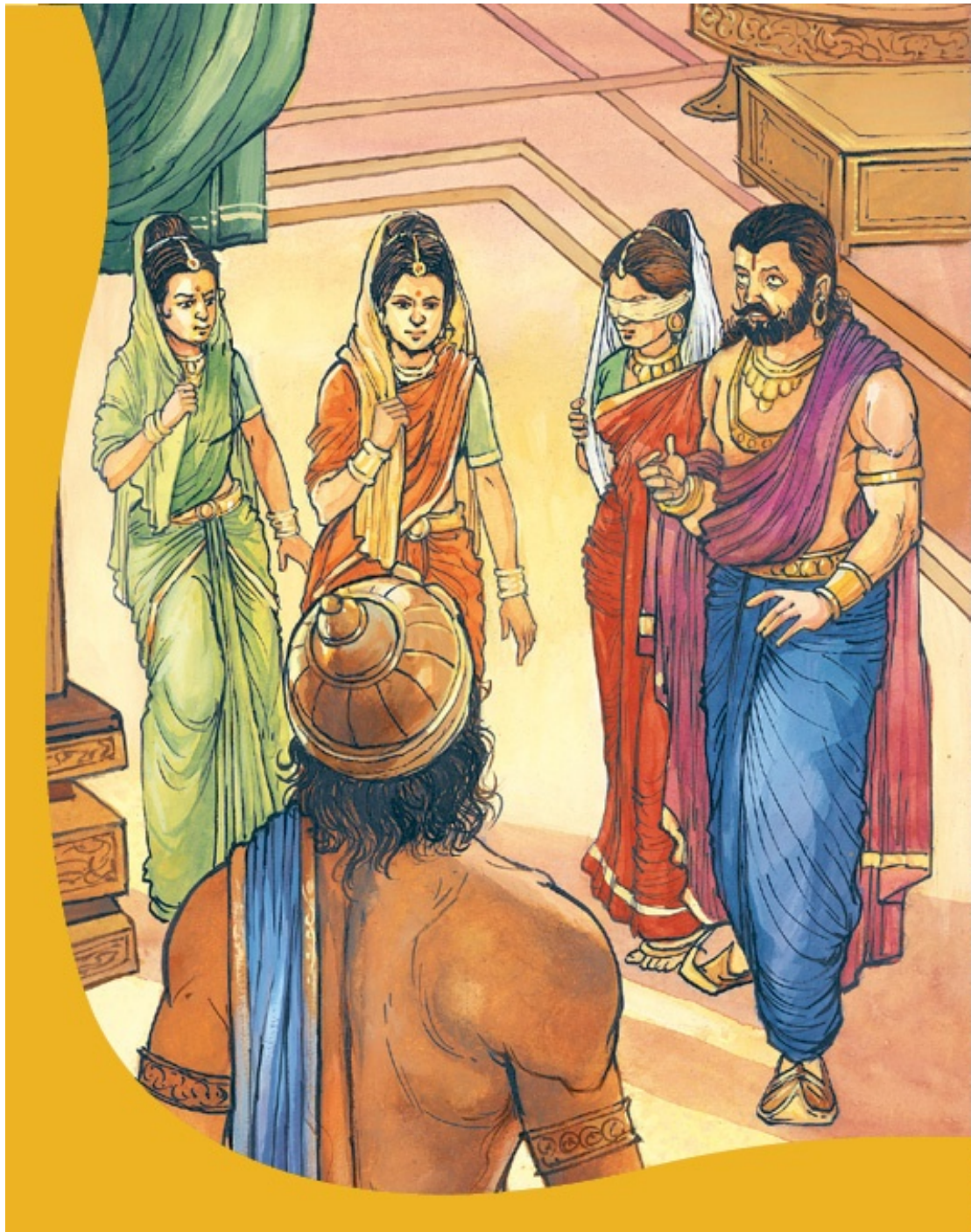
"Gandhari?" her father said, gaping at her.

"Yes, Father. I wish to marry him."

"But, Gandhari," Shakuni said, "Dhritarashtra is blind and will be a burden to

you. My darling sister, you are meant for a king, not some fool who cannot even rule his own birthright!"

"I don't see how being blind means that he's a fool too," she said. "Regardless, I wish to marry him. And you say he is disabled?" She untied her sash from around her waist and held it in her hands. "Then, as his wife it is my duty to partake of his suffering because a husband and wife share everything." She bound the sash over her eyes, completely covering her vision.



“Gandhari!” her father stepped to her, trying to stop her action. She resisted, knotting the sash tightly so it wouldn’t slip. Shakuni shouted at her, ordering her to remove it.

She shook her head. “I only listen to my husband now,” she said. “And his name is Prince Dhritarashtra.”

Her father and brother argued with her but she would not change her mind. Finally, her father turned to Bheeshma. “It seems she will not relent. I agree

to wed her to Dhritarashtra.”

Gandhari embraced her father, thanking him.

Bheeshma then went to Gandhari and, not being able to see, she slowly bent to touch his feet in respect. “What you have done is most noble,” he told her, raising his hands to bless her. “The Bharat clan is proud to call you daughter-in-law, devotee of Shiv.”

Shakuni then insisted that he accompany her to Hastinapur. “I will not leave my sister alone amongst strangers when she is blindfolded and vulnerable!”

Bheeshma nodded. “Of course you may join her, Prince Shakuni. Hastinapur will welcome you as much as your sister. You shall see how she is showered with love.”

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra were wed under a canopy of flowers. Bheeshma and Satyawati presided over the festivities and the crowd watched in wonder as blind Dhritarashtra and blindfolded Gandhari were led around the sacred fire by their attendants. No one had ever seen such a wedding.

On the wedding night, Dhritashtra held Gandhari’s hand. “You made a bad bargain,” he said, “in marrying me.”

“Don’t say that,” she said. “I accepted you the moment *Taat Shree* uttered your name.”

“But why did you bind your eyes?” he whispered. “I never wanted my wife to live as I do. Take it off,” he said, moving his hands to pull off the blindfold. She grabbed his fingers, trying to stop him but he was strong.

“My lord,” she said, “Don’t. I have taken a vow to never remove it.”

He stilled. “A vow?”

“Yes. It is my solemn vow and austerity. As my husband it is your duty to protect my vows and my austerities.”

His fingers gently moved over the silk of her blindfold, then down her cheeks to her delicate jaw. “I will protect you, my lady,” he told her. “We never break our vows in the Bharat clan.”



10. Kunti and Madri

Now that Dhritarashtra was married, Bheeshma considered who would be Pandu's wife.

It was said that Kunti of the Yadu clan was beautiful, healthy, and clever, the perfect wife for Pandu. When the date of her *swayamvar* was announced, Bheeshma sent Pandu to win her, knowing that handsome and charming Pandu would have no difficulty.

Kunti chose him and they married. But what Bheeshma didn't know was that Kunti had a secret that no one knew, not even her father.

It all started when Sage Durvasa visited their kingdom. Kunti's father, Kuntibhoj, told her to serve the sage in all things and she obeyed. She waited on Durvasa night and day, cooking his meals, cleaning his clothes, fanning him as he slept. She brought visitors to see him and was his scribe when he wanted to write letters. She was devoted to Durvasa's every wish because he was her guru. Durvasa was most pleased with her service. "Daughter Kunti," he said, "ask me for a boon."

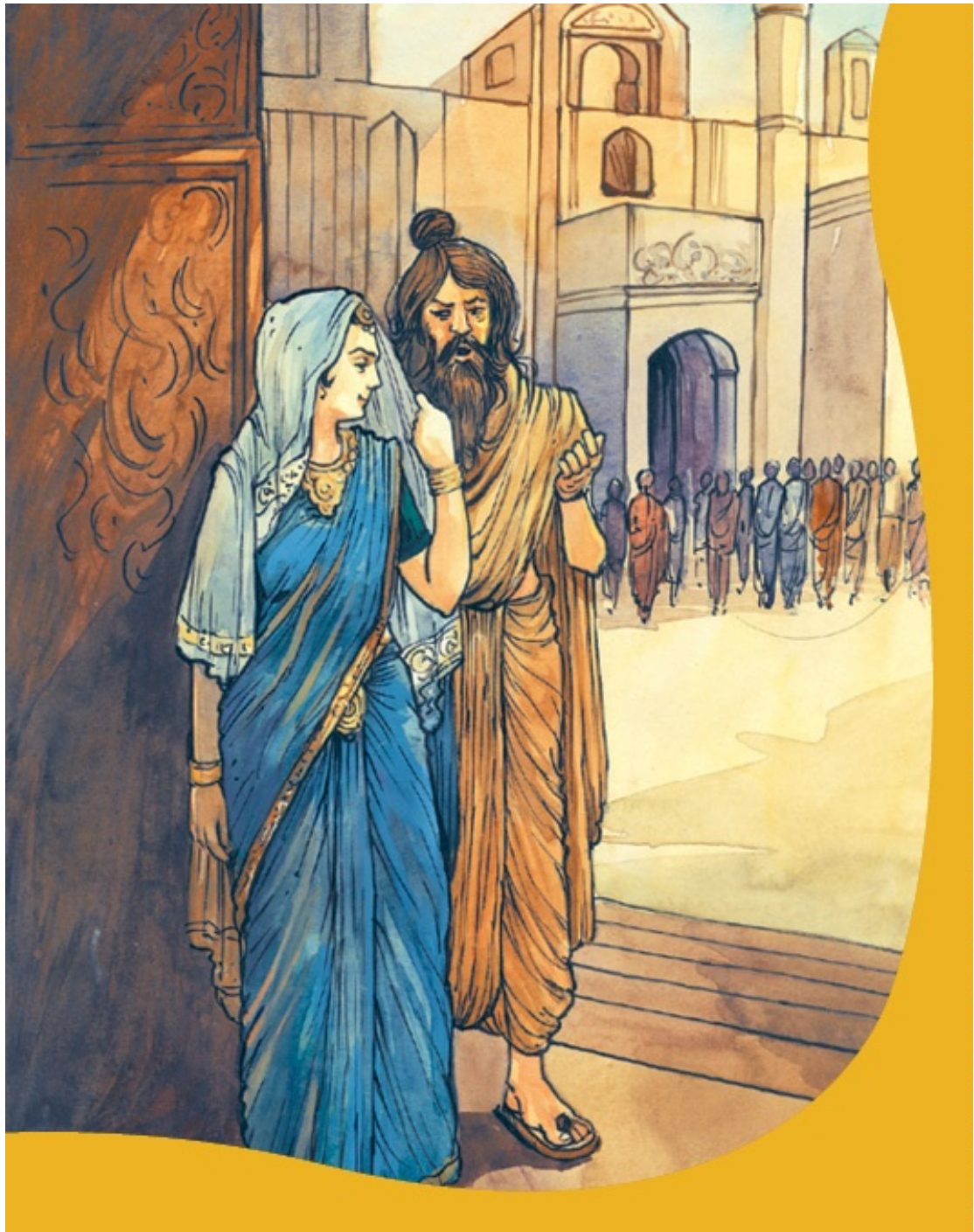
Kunti asked her guru to look into her future and give her something that would help in her life. Sage Durvasa then whispered a mantra in her ear that allowed her to call on any *devata* and ask for a boon.

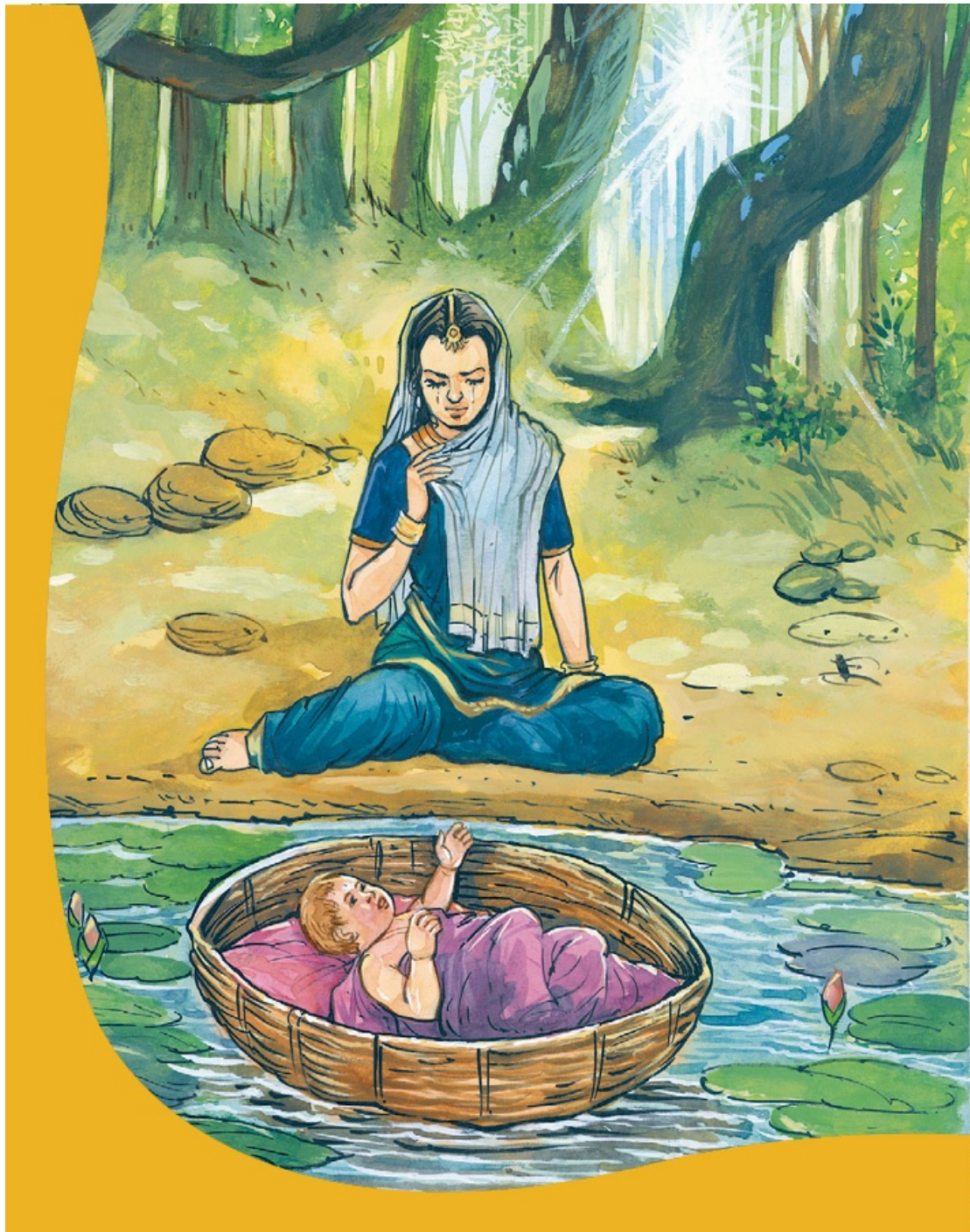
With this blessing, Sage Durvasa departed the kingdom and Kunti was left with her mantra, curious about when she might need to use it. She thought about it everyday, wondering about whether or not it even worked. How could a *devata* be summoned by a mortal like her? One morning as she was offering prayers to Surya, Kunti whispered the mantra.

There was a blaze of dazzling light. She fell to her knees and blinked and strained to clear her vision, Finally, she saw Surya himself before her. He was golden-skinned and black haired and so beautiful she was amazed. The heat emanating from him made her flushed and sweaty.

When he asked what boon she wished for, she was stunned. "I-I don't need a boon. I was just seeing if the mantra worked."

"I must give you something, Kunti," Surya told her. "Otherwise the power of the mantra will be destroyed and that will shake the foundations of the universe."





“But I don’t want anything,” Kunti said.

“That does not matter. I will give you a son.”

She gasped again. “You can’t! I’m not married.”

“Do not fear,” Surya told her. “You’ll remain a virgin and our son will be born with divine armor and earrings that will protect him throughout life. He will be most generous-hearted and his name will be Karn.”

Before she could say anything more, Surya placed a baby boy in her lap and disappeared.

Kunti looked down at her son Karn. The baby blinked up at her with big innocent eyes, his tender little hands curled up into fists. He did have armor that covered his whole body like skin and earrings glinted from his tiny earlobes. Kunti touched his plump cheek and he opened his mouth, looking for his mother to feed him.

Kunti wanted to feed him. She wanted to hold him forever and never let go. But she couldn't. How could she explain this baby to her father, to her people? She wasn't even married!

She looked down at Karn and wept, her tears falling onto his soft cheek. Quickly, she wrapped him in one of her garments, a pink sari, and put him in a basket. Alone, she sneaked out of the palace and ran down to the river Yamuna.

Looking at him one last time, she kissed his face and the baby wailed, sensing the pain in his mother. "Forgive me, Karn," she said.

She set the basket on the water and let it float downstream. Kunti prayed some kind soul would find her son and raise him as their own. Even as she watched the basket float away, Kunti longed to pull it back to her.

Now on her wedding night, she meant to tell her husband everything. She wanted Pandu to find Karn for her so they could raise him together. She couldn't live without her son anymore.

As Pandu entered the room, Kunti stood to welcome him. But he didn't smile at her. "I have to go," he said.

"Go?" she asked, walking up to him.

He nodded. "I've been called to war."

Her lips parted. "But it's our wedding night."

He touched her temple, his finger gentle. "Forgive me, my lady. A king's first wife is always his kingdom. My people need me."

She understood the demands of royalty. She was from the royal Yadu dynasty.

But she'd never imagined this. "When will you come back?"

"When the war is won."

She looked down at her hands, knowing there was no time to talk to Pandu, to tell him of Karn. "Then I will wait for you," she said.

"I knew when I first saw you that you would be a magnificent queen," Pandu said. He raised her hand and kissed it.

"Go then," she told him. "Be victorious."

Pandu went away to war, challenged by Shalya, the king of Madra. On the battlefield, when he faced Madra's forces, Shalya sent out a white flag, asking to negotiate. Pandu agreed and rode out to the center of the battlefield. If war could be avoided then everything had to be done to make it so, Pandu thought.

Shalya was blunt. "I want you to marry my sister, Madri."

Pandu blinked. "That's what your challenge was for? To make me marry her? Why not just send a proposal?"

Shalya smiled. "I wanted to see you command your forces. That would let me know if you were worthy of marrying her. I see now that you are worthy so now we will have an alliance."

Pandu didn't know what to say. He'd only just married Kunti and hadn't even had time to spend with her. What would she think if he returned to Hastinapur with another wife? "I haven't seen your sister," he said, stalling. "Perhaps if I visit Madra-"

"She's right here," Shalya said. Pandu raised his eyebrows when Shalya's charioteer stood up, obviously a woman. She pulled off her turban and long silky black hair tumbled down to her knees. She looked up at Pandu and dimpled.

"My sister, Madri," Shalya said. "She always rides with me into war."

Pandu gaped but quickly shut his mouth. He looked from Madri to Shalya to his men behind him. They were all his soldiers, ready to fight should he give the order. If he refused Shalya's offer of alliance then many of them would die. How could he let them die for such a reason?

“We will marry,” Pandu said. “And your sister may ride with me into war at a later date if she wishes.”

She giggled.

Their marriage was performed right there on the battlefield, Shalya having made all the preparations beforehand. Pandu rode home with his new queen. They entered the palace and Pandu tried to hide that he was sick with dread. What would Kunti say?

She was waiting at the doorway of their royal chambers, holding an *arati* plate to welcome him. She froze when she saw a lady obviously dressed as a bride with the king.

Pandu cleared his throat. “This is Madri, sister to the King of Madra. She is now your sister also,” he told Kunti.

Her sharp gaze fastened on him and he saw that Kunti immediately understood what had happened. She performed the *arati* on them both. “Welcome, sister.”

Pandu sighed in relief and thanked the Almighty for giving him a clever wife.

Kunti realized as she looked at Madri, the pretty second wife, that she could never tell Pandu about Karn. Why would Pandu ever love Kunti if he knew the truth? Why would he not go to Madri and forget all about her?

Kunti realized that if she wanted her husband to love her, she could never have her son.



11. Kindam's Curse

Pandu fought great wars after marrying his two wives. There were many who wanted to test the strength of Hastinapur and steal her wealth from the new king. Pandu was forced to prove that Hastinapur was still the power it had always been. He protected the kingdom's territories and forced these arrogant kings to submit to him.

The people of Hastinapur were wild with joy at their king's victories. They celebrated in the streets and sang songs of his glory. They knew that with Pandu as their king, they were always safe from harm.

Returning after the last of many wars, Pandu was greeted by a cheering crowd. He embraced his people and danced with them, making them adore him even more. He let them carry him through the streets to the palace, his subjects showering flowers on him as he was set down on his feet. He entered the palace and greeted his elders and his brothers, then went to his private chambers. Kunti and Madri waited for him and he looked forward to some rest with his wives.

He embraced them both and proposed taking them away on a vacation, now that he didn't have to be close to the city in case of attack.

Madri enthusiastically agreed. Kunti was more calm. "Will *Taat Shree* agree?"

she asked. "So soon after the war? Won't the people want you here to celebrate?"

Pandu nodded. "He'll agree. He's always saying I shouldn't dwell on victories anyway. It makes one arrogant and boastful," he teased.

She finally smiled. "Then let us go."

Taking the permission of the court, Pandu took his wives to a cottage in the countryside. Away from the crowds and politics, Pandu was able to relax for the first time in... He couldn't even remember the last time he'd been relaxed. He spent long lazy days with his wives and they enjoyed the peace of nature around them.

One day Pandu and Madri decided they would have a horse race.

"What do I get if I win?" Madri asked.

"I'll give you sons. Hmmm... Five sounds like a good number." Pandu said. "And if I win then you give me five sons."

"*What!*" she said. "So even if I win you get the prize?"

Pandu grinned.

"Not fair," Madri pouted. "Why should I do all the work? I'm the younger wife. How about Kunti gives three sons and I give two? What do you say, Elder Sister?"

Kunti was embroidering one of the king's garments. "I agree to that but you better win, Madri. Otherwise we'll never hear the end of it."

Madri didn't win. Pandu beat her by a hand and hooted and hollered with victory.

"I thought," Kunti said to him with a wry note in her voice, "that *Taat Shree* told you not to dwell on victories because they make one 'arrogant and boastful'?"

He laughed. "Say what you want, my lady. I still get five sons!"

Sage Kindam's *ashram* was close by to their cottage and Pandu liked to visit the young sage to discuss his favorite subject, the scriptures. Kunti and Madri

went with him and they enjoyed the time spent there with the sage's pretty wife.

One day, as the three of them were relaxing on the porch of their cottage, lying on swings suspended from the ceiling, they heard the roar of a tiger. Madri sat up on her swing. "Oh! My lord, will you hunt it for me?"

"Hunt it?" Kunti said, from her swing across the way. "But why?"

"They have beautiful coats!" Madri exclaimed. "I'll make it into a rug. Oh please, my lord. Please get it for me."

Pandu rolled up to sit on his comfortable swing. He looked out into the forest.

"The King is here to take rest from violence," Kunti said, "not go around killing things. And what has the tiger done to us that we should hunt it?"

"It would be such a beautiful rug," Madri said, batting her lashes at Pandu.

He stood.

"My lord," Kunti exclaimed. "You can't be serious."

"It's dangerous to let it so close to the cottage anyway, my lady," he told her. "I don't want either of you vulnerable."

"That's why we have guards," Kunti told him. "You don't have to do this."

He went inside and emerged holding his bow and arrows. Kunti saw the determined look on his face and sighed.

Madri clapped her hands in delight and saw him off with a big kiss.

Kunti waited, tense, for Pandu to return. Even Madri became agitated as the time dragged on. They could hear roars and rustles in the distance. Finally, there was silence.

Kunti was white-faced. The sky was darkening but the king had not returned. Pandu would never let her worry like this if he was well. Kunti put on her sandals, planning to search for him.

That was when she saw him emerging from the trees. He looked sick, like he would faint. She rushed to him, Madri behind her, and they were about to grab him when he pulled away. Confused, Kunti searched his body but could

find no wounds.

“What happened?” she cried.

“Calamity,” he whispered, his eyes glazed. “I followed the sound of the tiger and shot my arrow. But I realized from the cry of pain that it wasn’t a tiger. It was Sage Kindam and his wife.”

Kunti and Madri put their hands to their mouths.

“By the time I reached them, his wife was already dead. Sage Kindam died soon after. I’d pierced them both in the chest as they lay together in the forest.” Tears ran from Pandu’s eyes. “I must abdicate for I am no longer worthy of the throne,” Pandu said. “I must go into exile.”

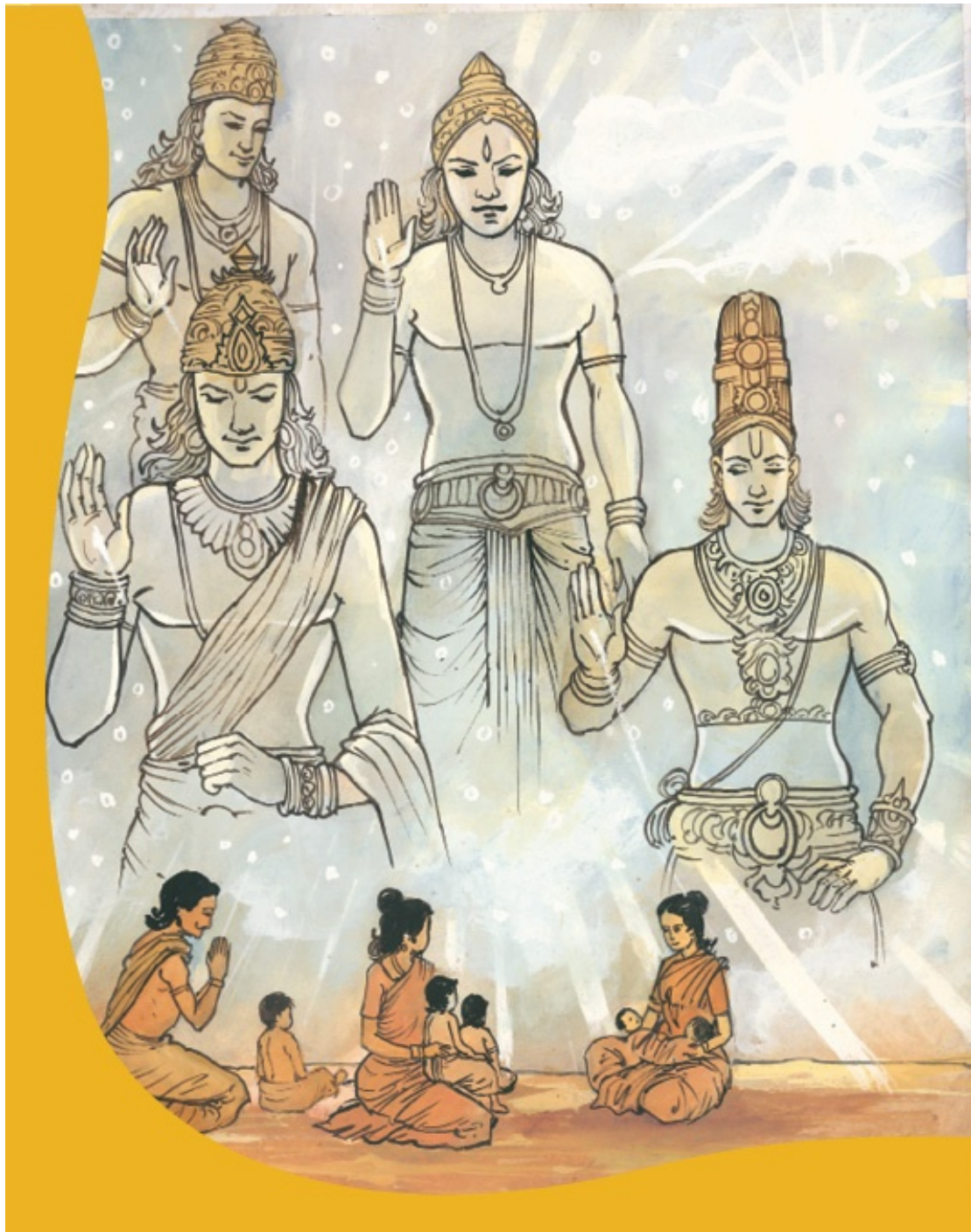
“I will go with you,” Kunti told him.

“And I,” Madri cried. “It’s my fault anyway. I’m the one who told you to go hunting.”

“It’s not your fault,” Pandu said. “It’s mine. I shouldn’t have gone hunting and I shouldn’t have shot without seeing my target. It’s all my fault. Neither of you will suffer for my mistakes. You will both stay in Hastinapur.”

“Any life without you is suffering,” Kunti told him. “We will come with you into exile.”

They returned to Hastinapur to inform their elders of the awful truth. Dhritarashtra argued loudly that Pandu should not have to abdicate because it had been an accident. Pandu didn’t listen. He begged Dhritarashtra to be king in his stead.



Nobody could change Pandu's mind, not Bheeshma or Satyawati or Vidur or even his mother Ambalika. Pandu crowned Dhritarashtra to represent him until the next heir was ready to rule. Then, accompanied by Kunti and Madri, Pandu went into exile.

They lived in the simplicity of the forest, a thatched hut their home. Pandu devoted himself to penance. He meditated for hours on end. He made long journeys to visit sages and places of pilgrimage. He stayed silent for days on

end.

Kunti felt that something was wrong, something besides Pandu's guilt from killing the sage. Pandu hadn't touched her once, not even to hold her hand, since this tragedy had happened. It wasn't like him. He was normally an affectionate husband, gentle and sweet.

One morning when they were alone she asked him what was the matter.

Pandu hung his head. "Before he died, Sage Kindam cursed me. He said that since he was dying while embracing his wife, I would die the same way. He said that the next time I touched either of my wives I would die on the spot."

Kunti was open-mouthed with horror.

"We will never have our five children," Pandu said. "Hastinapur will have no heir from us."

Kunti understood now why her husband was so sad. To know that they could never touch again made her want to weep but there was still hope for one thing. "Don't grieve for an heir," she told him. "There is a way to fulfill that duty." She told him of Sage Durvasa and the mantra she possessed to summon any *devata*.

Pandu jumped up. "Then summon Dharmaraj. Ask for a son!"

Kunti summoned Dharmaraj, the lord of righteousness, and he gave her a baby who was fair-skinned and quiet. Dharmaraj said that this boy would be his own representative on earth. This boy would be steady in war and, therefore, his name was Yudhishtir.

Kunti then summoned Vayu, the *devata* of wind, and he gave her an uncommonly large baby with copper-colored skin. Vayu said that this boy would be so strong that he would threaten all demons in the world and thus was named Bheem.

Kunti then summoned Indra, king of the *devatas*, who granted her son a who was dark-skinned and beautiful. Indra told her this boy would be the greatest archer in the world. As he would also be soft-hearted, his name was Arjun.

Kunti gave Madri the mantra and Madri summoned the celestial Ashwini Twins, the *devatas* of medicine and healing. They granted her twins, Nakul

and Sahadev, both golden-skinned and talented in nature. Nakul would be the world's best horseman and the most beautiful man, Madri was told, while Sahadev would be the world's wisest warrior, enlightened in every way.

Pandu had his five sons. He thanked the Almighty every day for such mercy. Despite the curse and his guilt, Hastinapur would have worthy heirs.



12. The Lord Descends

Kunti had a brother named Vasudev. He was married to Princess Devaki, the sister of King Kansa of Mathura.

Vasudev and Devaki lived imprisoned in the deepest dungeon Mathura had. They were not there because they had committed any crime or broken any rules. They were imprisoned because a sage had made a prophecy on their wedding day. The sage had foretold that the Supreme Lord would take birth as Devaki's eighth child to kill Kansa.

King Kansa was a tyrant who had usurped his own father Ugrasen's throne and locked Ugrasen in a secret prison. Kansa tortured sages and brutalized women. The whole land cried out to be free of his oppression. When Kansa heard the prophecy, that his own sister's child would kill him, he imprisoned both Devaki and Vasudev and killed every baby they had.

Devaki wanted to die of heartbreak each time one of her children was killed. That her brother, whom she had always loved, could be so cruel... She could never understand it. Vasudev lived with the same grief but he tried to stay strong for Devaki. He told her that they had to stay alive to give birth to the savior. The whole world was counting on them.

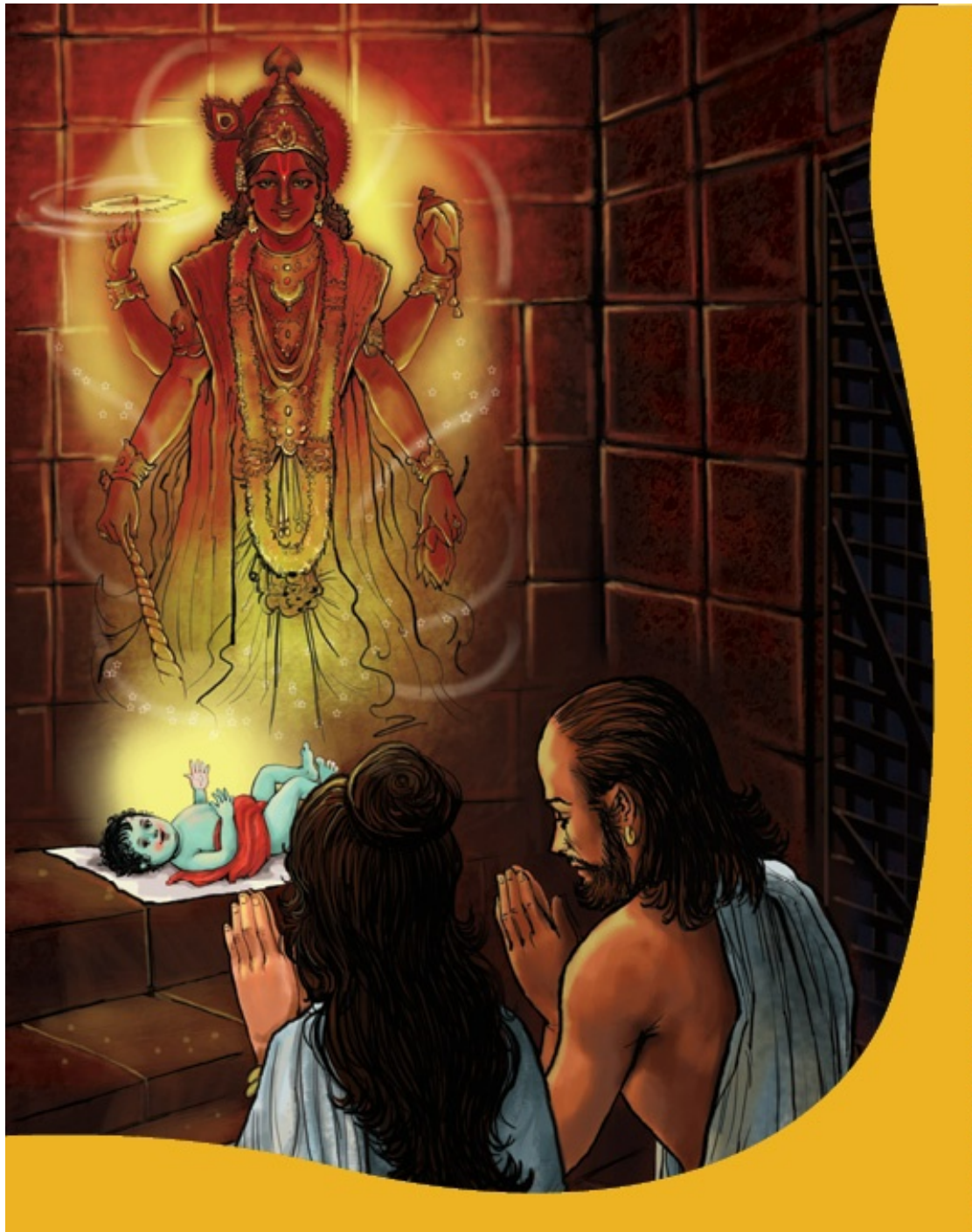
They were given a ray of hope with their seventh child. On the Lord's

command, *Devi* Yogmaya transferred the fetus from Devaki to Rohini, Vasudev's other wife. Rohini was hiding from Kansa in the village of Gokul, in the house of Nand who was one of Vasudev's close friends. There, Rohini gave birth to the baby, named Balaram, without Kansa ever knowing.

Devaki became pregnant with her eighth baby and, close to the time Lord Indra blessed Kunti with Arjun, the savior appeared as Shree Krishna.

It happened in the middle of the night, during a terrible storm. Around their cell, all the guards had strangely fallen asleep. The thunder crashed above their heads and Devaki screamed in fright, moving her legs so the chains around her ankles rattled.

There was a blinding light. Devaki blinked and strained, trying to focus her eyes. Vasudev hands were up in the air, trying to shield his vision.



“Beloved Mother and Father,” a deep voice said, making the air around them tremble.

Slowly, they managed to see what was above them. It was the Supreme Lord Vishnu, his dark body radiating pure light in the blackness of the dungeon. He smiled down at them, making a thrill run through their bodies.

“I am here to fulfill my promise to you,” he told them. “Long ago, in a previous life, you asked me to be your son and I agreed.”

Tears streamed from Devaki's eyes. She remembered what the Lord spoke of. She'd waited so many lifetimes for this moment.

Vasudev folded his palms. "We're so happy, Lord."

"It is I who is happy, Father. Now you must take me across the Yamuna to Nand's house. There Yashoda has given birth to a daughter. Put me in her daughter's place and bring the baby girl back here."

Vasudev nodded and the Lord turned to Devaki. "Mother, I know how long you have waited for me yet you do not speak. Does it not please you to see me?"

"It does please me," she said, wiping her eyes. "I'm so happy. It's just that I'm waiting to see my son."

The Lord smiled at her, outshining the sun and moon and all the stars. "For you I took birth here tonight. Your wish is my command, Mother." In another flash of light, Vishnu disappeared and there was only a baby on the ground.

Devaki rushed to pick up the baby. She was mesmerized by her son. He had huge eyes that looked like lotus petals. His lips were tender and his skin was like a blushing dark rose. She counted his ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes, seeing how utterly perfect he was. "My son," she whispered. "My baby."

As Vasudev took the child his chains fell to the ground.

They grabbed a basket that Devaki had woven from old straw and lined it with cloths before laying their son inside it.

The door to their cell swung open, the guards outside still unconscious.

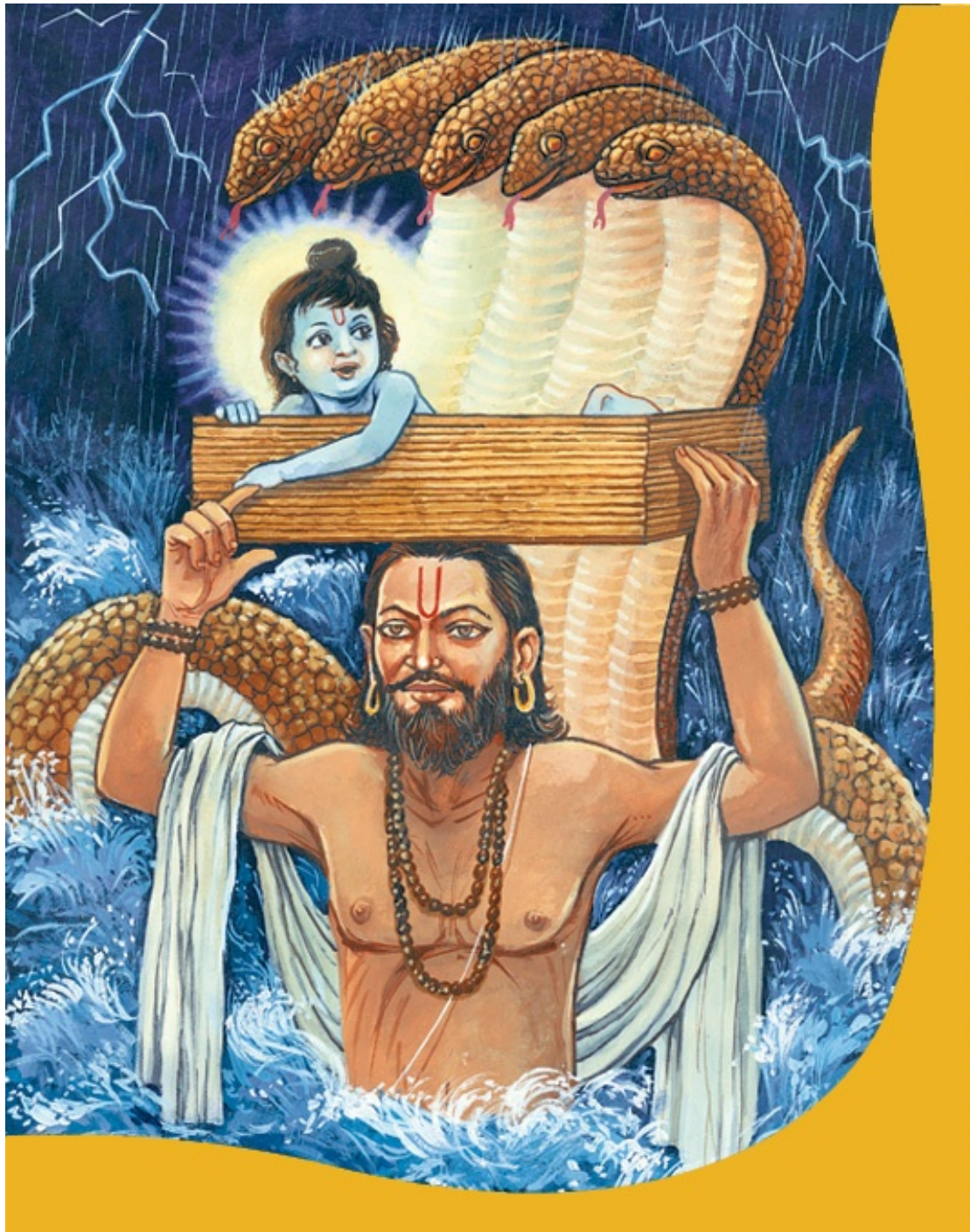
Vasudev carefully held the basket and turned to go.

A sob caught in Devaki's throat. She caught her baby's tiny feet and kissed them. Then, squeezing her eyes shut, she let him go.

Vasudev made his way through the dungeon up to the open air. The storm was raging and he hesitated in the doorway, wondering how he could take his son out in weather like this. Then, out of nowhere, a large serpent appeared, wrapped around the basket. It had not one head but many and it spread them over the baby like an umbrella over a king. Vasudev was not afraid. He knew

that the dropped chains, the open doors, and the sleeping guards were all for the birth of the savior. This serpent was Shesh Naag sheltering Vishnu.

Vasudev lifted the basket over his head and stepped out into the storm. The rain lashed at him but he gritted his teeth and kept moving until he reached the river. The Yamuna was flooded, her waters far higher than normal. Vasudev waded in, the current hitting him like charging horses. He chanted Vishnu's name and held the baby above him, praying that he'd reach the other side.



Then an astonishing thing happened. As he stepped further, the water dropped to knee level, making it easier to walk. Vasudev saw that the river on either side of him was held up by some force.

Mother Yamuna, Vasudev thought. The river herself.

Vasudev climbed the opposite bank and reached the shelter of the trees when he heard the river rising again. Yamuna's waters rushed downstream in a violent flood.

Vasudev continued on to Gokul where Rohini was and where his friend Nand was the chief. The village was quiet, all asleep despite the storm. In silence, Vasudev came to Nand's front door and lowered the basket. The serpent disappeared.

Vasudev pushed open the door and entered the quiet house. He saw Nand lying asleep on a cot in one room, and in a larger room lay Yashoda, unconscious, sweat still drying on her brow. A newborn baby girl lay beside her. There was no one around her—no servants or midwife. Yashoda must have given birth all alone and fainted, another miracle. Vasudev lay his baby boy down beside Yashoda and gently put the baby girl into his son's basket.

He looked at his son one last time. *Be safe, my son*, he thought. *We love you. You are the reason we live*. He raised the basket to his head and walked to the door. He turned one last time to look at his baby.

The savior looked back at him with innocent petal eyes, waving his little hands in the air.

Vasudev left Nand's house and returned to Devaki. The moment he was in their cell, the door swung shut behind him. The chains snaked around his ankles and the guards awoke from their sleep. They saw the baby and raised the alarm, calling for the king.

Devaki took the little girl from Vasudev and hugged her.

Kansa appeared in the doorway. "Give me the baby, Devaki," he said, advancing on her.

Vasudev clasped Devaki and the baby to him tightly. "It's a girl, Kansa. A helpless baby girl. She cannot be a threat to you."

"A girl?"

For a moment they both thought Kansa might retreat. But then: "No, it's still your eighth child." He tried to grab it.

Suddenly, the child flew out of Devaki's hands and rose above them all. She changed form to become a *Devi*, wielding weapons in her many hands. It was Yogmaya herself!

“Fool!” she called down to Kansa. “You cannot harm me. Your death has already taken birth.” She disappeared in a flash, leaving the cell quivering with the force of her being.

Trembling, Kansa retreated. Devaki and Vasudev clasped each other in hope. They prayed that the savior was safe.



13. Love Personified

Rohini woke when Balaram started crying and she took him to get some water. As she passed Yashoda's bedchamber, she saw the newborn baby at Yashoda's side.

Crying out in joy, she rushed into the room. "Yashoda! Yashoda!"

Yashoda woke from her sleep and blinked up at Rohini, dazed. "What?"

"You're a crazy woman," Rohini told her. "You gave birth and didn't wake any of us up? Look! You have a son!"

Yashoda sat up and looked down at the beautiful baby beside her. She didn't remember anything, it was all fuzzy. She picked her baby up and gazed at his adorable face.

"Nand!" Rohini cried. "Nand! Wake up! Your son is born!"

There was a crash as Nand jerked and fell out of his cot. "What?" he said, picking himself up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He rushed into Yashoda's room.

She held the baby out to him. "Our son."

Nand stared at the boy in silence. He and Yashoda had been married for so

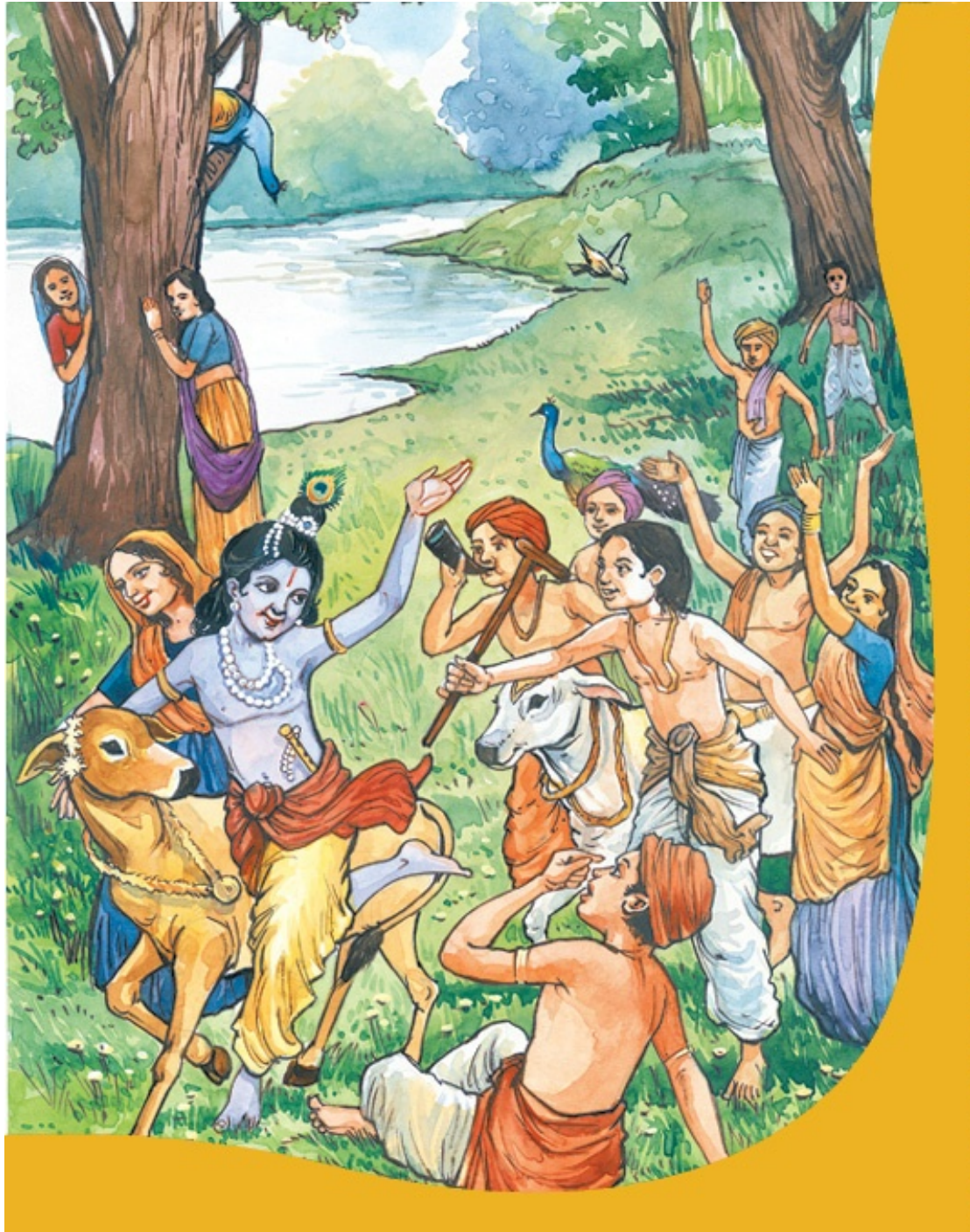
many years and never had any children. He'd almost given up hope and now this. A son! He crouched beside Yashoda, afraid to touch the baby in case he hurt it. "Can it be?" he whispered.

Yashoda wept tears of joy. "Finally!" she said. "The Almighty blesses us."

Rohini had run out to wake the villagers. Their chief Nand had a son! The people awoke and Gokul celebrated with music and color and endless feasting. They praised the baby's dark beauty and their joy was so loud that it reached Kansa's ears in Mathura.

"Childless Nand has a newborn son?" he asked his spies in disbelief. "No. It must be Devaki's eighth child. Send soldiers to kill it."

"Your Majesty," his spy said, "what if they switch the baby with another family?"



“Kill them all,” Kansa whispered. “Kill all the newborn children in Gokul and all of Vraj. Kill every newborn in the kingdom!”

His men went out and slaughtered every newborn baby they could find. Mothers and fathers screamed and fought, trying to protect their children, but the soldiers followed Kansa’s orders. They killed child after child, leaving desolation and blood everywhere.

When the soldiers came for Nand’s son, they knocked Yashoda unconscious

and went for the baby. The Lord entered their minds and made them confused and they thought they'd already killed him. They went back and told Kansa: "All the newborns are dead."

Kansa's spies later revealed that Nand's son was still alive so Kansa ordered his old nurse, a *rakshasi* named Putana, to kill the baby.

Putana told Kansa she would kill the baby by smearing poison on her chest and breastfeeding him. She disguised her ugly form as a beautiful lady in a soft sari and pretty jewels. She entered the house and stole Nand's son, finding a secret place where she could breastfeed.

The Lord knew who Putana really was. Instead of sucking the poison he began sucking her life force out of her body. Putana knew something was wrong when she began to feel weak. She tried to pull the baby away but he wouldn't move. "Let me go! Let me go!" she cried. The Lord heard her plea and mercifully let her go from the mortal world. He liberated her soul from the cycle of life and death and sent her to his own realm.

Nand, Yashoda, and Rohini were frightened by Putana's attempt on Krishna's life, as well as the violence of Kansa's soldiers. They moved their people to a new village in Vraj called Nandagaon, after the chief Nand, to escape the persecution.

When Kansa heard that Putana was dead, he realized that this child Krishna was a serious threat. For years, Kansa sent *rakshas* after *rakshas* to kill Krishna and terrorize the people of Vraj but Krishna protected everyone by destroying the demons. Krishna was so compassionate that when he killed the *rakshas* he liberated their souls from the cycle of life and death, just as he had with Putana.

Despite being the Almighty and having such power, Krishna lived a simple life. He herded cows and served his parents and Mother Rohini and played with Balaram and the cowherds and milkmaids, the *gopas* and *gopis*, of Vraj. They were all devoted to Krishna. He was their prince, their protector, and he made their hearts melt with his childish pranks. He would sneak into the houses of the *gopis* and steal all their butter. The *gopis* would catch him and pretend to be angry but really, they just wanted an excuse to see him. If they didn't see him for even one day, they felt bereft.

The cows also loved Krishna. They gave so much milk because they wanted to please him. Sometimes when he was herding them, a few cows would hide to see if he noticed they were missing. When Krishna came looking for them, the cows would weep with joy.

The trees, the plants, the birds, the monkeys, the parrots, the deer—they all gave love to Krishna. He loved them back by playing with the animals, climbing the trees, calling the birds. He protected his devotee, the river Yamuna, when the poisonous snake Kaliya polluted her waters. Krishna fought with Kaliya and subdued him, making him promise never to pollute the river waters again.

Krishna's fame spread so wide that Kunti and Pandu in their forest exile heard of it. They heard that Vasudev's friend, Nand, had the most extraordinary son who inspired love in everyone. Kunti had already been wishing to see her sister-in-law, Rohini, so Pandu told her to go. Kunti, leaving their five children in Madri's care, went to visit Nand's house. She embraced her nephew, Balaram, who looked just like her brother, Vasudev, and immediately fell in love with Krishna who climbed into her lap and called her "Auntie." Kunti visited during Diwali and helped Yashoda during all the festivities.

On New Year's Day, all of Vraj was engaged in major preparations for a festival. There was a large *yajna* pit where Pundits were arranging things. There were mounds of flowers that the *gopis* were stringing together to decorate the *yajna* pit. There were all kinds of offerings such as grains and textiles and many fruits.

Krishna awoke and saw it all and asked his father what was happening.

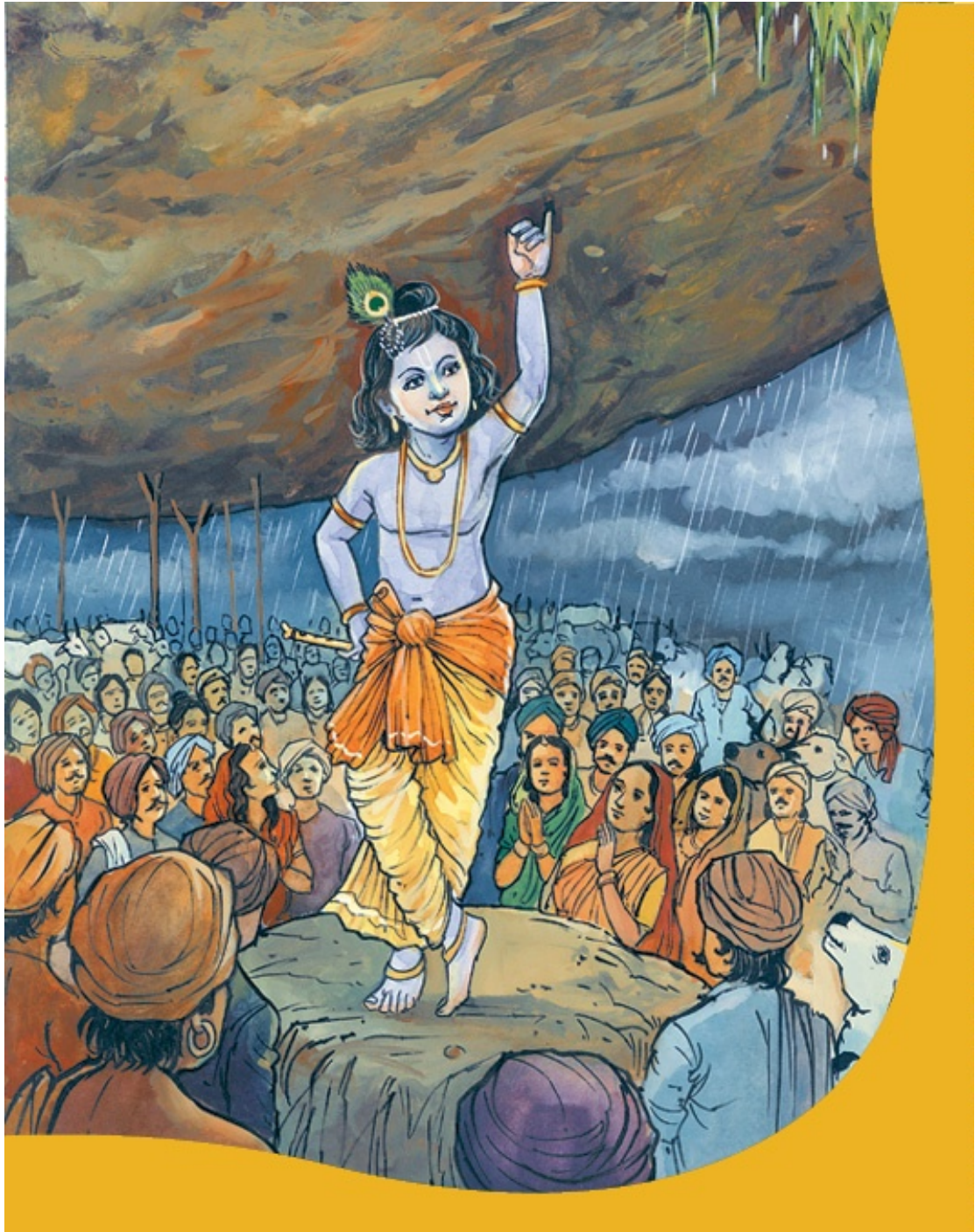
"We're preparing to worship Lord Indra, to thank him for bringing the rains," Nand said.

Krishna frowned. "We have to thank Indra for the rain? But isn't it his duty to send the rain?"

Nand put his hand over Krishna's mouth. "Shhhh, son, you mustn't speak like that. Indra has a terrible temper. If you make him angry he might destroy all of Vraj."

Krishna moved Nand's hand away. "But, Father, if he's so terrible, why do you

worship him? A good person doesn't become angry." Krishna looked at all his people. "You don't have to be afraid. Indra has no right to be angry. We are cowherds. Our lives are tied to the environment of the cows and the Yamuna and the forests and Mount Goverdhan. The mountain provides so many herbs and medicines and foods that nourish us but Goverdhan never gets angry if we don't worship him. The cows give us milk, the river gives us water, the land grows our grain, and the forests provide fruits and grazing for the cows. They never get angry if we don't worship them. They take care of us selflessly, out of love. We should worship them instead of Indra."



A crowd had gathered around Krishna as he spoke and they began to see what he meant. They asked Krishna how they could worship the nature surrounding them.

“We worship the cows by protecting them from harm and letting them roam free,” Krishna told them. “We worship the river and land and forests by keeping them clean of pollutants and never taking more than we need from them. We worship Mount Goverdhan with offerings. If we give back some of

our bounty then that will re-nourish the land that gives us so much.”

The people nodded their heads and Nand beamed. “Everyone, gather whatever you wish to offer to Mount Goverdhan. Today, we worship him,” Nand said.

Krishna smiled as the people rushed around, changing the arrangements to a new way of worship. They lovingly offered grains, fruits, sweets, seeds, milk, and many different things to Mount Goverdhan. Kunti was standing to the side, marveling at how Krishna had changed everyone’s mind from fear to love.

Indra, however, was not pleased. He brought a terrible storm to Vraj to punish the people for not worshipping him. The land began to flood and the people ran to Krishna in panic.

Krishna went to Mount Goverdhan and, before everyone’s eyes he lifted the entire mountain above his head. “Come under Goverdhan,” he told them all. “Bring all the cows and animals. Bring everyone.”

Kunti watched as all the people of Vraj crowded together with their animals under the mountain. They were all in Krishna’s shelter. Kunti herself was under that mountain and she realized that Krishna was not just extraordinary, he was the Almighty! Kunti surrendered her heart, mind, and soul to Giridhar, the Mountain-Lifter. She knew that she must tell her children that the Almighty had descended to earth as Krishna. She would tell them to always live in his shelter.

Indra finally came to his senses after seven days and nights. He saw how foolish and arrogant he’d been to fight with the Supreme Lord. Indra stopped the rain and surrendered. He laid his crown at Krishna’s feet and said that Krishna was Govind, the Protector of all Nature.

Krishna forgave Indra for his arrogance and blessed him.

Indra then requested a boon from Govind. “I have a son named Arjun whom I gave to your aunt Kunti,” Indra said to Krishna. “I ask that you protect him.”

Krishna promised: “I will always protect Arjun, son of Kunti.”



14. Secret Revealed

The leader of the *gopis*, Radha, was Krishna's other half. She was the Almighty who had descended in female form to help mankind. Where Krishna was, there was Radha and where Radha was, there was Krishna. In the *Maharaas* dance, Radha and Krishna showed the world that the intimate bond between the Lord and his devotees was pure and unselfish. Radha and Krishna surrendered to each other with no pride or ego, teaching the people what true love was.

Such love could not be understood by Kansa, the tyrant of Mathura.

When word reached him that Krishna had lifted Mount Goverdhan and defied Lord Indra himself, Kansa was filled with dread. He knew without a doubt that this was Devaki's eighth son. He summoned Akrur, a Yadu warrior and politician who was also Vasudev's close friend. Akrur was well respected in Mathura and throughout the kingdom.

Akrur knew that this summons from the king would only be bad news but he couldn't refuse. Akrur was leading the underground resistance against Kansa and if he refused Kansa's summons then the tyrant would begin to suspect him.

"Akrur, my friend," Kansa said as they sat on satin-lined sofas in Kansa's

private chamber. "I wish you to be my messenger."

"To whom shall I go as your messenger, Your Majesty?" Akrur asked Kansa, smiling.

"You know that soon I will be performing the Shiv *Dhanush yajna*, correct?" Kansa asked, referring to the ceremony to honor Lord Shiv's bow that Mathura had safeguarded for generations. "I wish for all the kingdom's most distinguished individuals to be present. Therefore, I wish you to go to Nandagaon and bring Nand's son, Krishna, here to Mathura for the *yajna*."

"Nand's son, Krishna?" Akrur asked, frowning. "But why?"

Kansa put his hand on Akrur's knee and leaned forward. He whispered: "Krishna is not Nand and Yashoda's son. He is Devaki's."

Akrur jerked back. "Devaki's?"

"Her eighth child, in fact. He was smuggled out of the dungeon." When Akrur only stared at him, Kansa raised his hands, gesturing to the heavens above. "No one knows what I suffer, Akrur. No one knows the guilt I feel. It pains me so much to have kept my sister and brother-in-law imprisoned for so many years. I weep every night."

Akrur turned the corners of his mouth downwards and nodded, as if he felt sympathy for evil Kansa.

"So now, when I perform this *yajna*, I wish to make amends," Kansa said. "I wish to free Devaki and Vasudev from the dungeon but I can't do that without having something to give them, to make up for all the pain I have caused. That is why I want you to bring their son here, so they can be happy together."

Akrur watched Kansa's face, marveling at the lies that rolled so easily from his lips. The fraud only wanted to bring Krishna here to kill him! Kansa wanted to destroy the boy now before Krishna became an adult powerful enough to destroy him.

But if Akrur refused to go to Nandagaon then Kansa would only send someone else. Then Krishna would die. And if this truly was Devaki's eighth child, then Akrur had to protect him by any means necessary. "I'll go as your messenger," Akrur said. He worried about Balaram, wondering if Kansa knew

that he was also Vasudev's son. Akrur had to protect the children!

Kansa granted Akrur soldiers to guard him on his journey but really, they were there to ensure that Akrur didn't escape. Akrur tried to get messages to his own men who were stationed throughout the city but was followed everywhere by Kansa's spies. He reached Nandagaon in the late afternoon and was greeted by Nand himself, who came to welcome this most respected friend. Nand brought Krishna with him.

When Akrur saw Krishna, he almost fell to the ground with shock. This *was* Devaki and Vasudev's son! He had Devaki's blooming lotus eyes, and Vasudev's charming smile, and when he greeted Akrur with his head bowed in respect, Akrur's heart melted. He embraced Krishna but dreaded the conversation he must have with Nand and Yashoda.

After dinner when Akrur was private with the two of them, he revealed to them both the truth.

Yashoda sat frozen. "What?" she gasped, looking at Akrur as if he was insane. "That's not true. Krishna is my son. I gave birth to him!"

"Who saw you give birth to him?" Akrur asked.

Yashoda shot to her feet. She opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. She looked at her husband who looked back, equally in shock. No one had seen Yashoda give birth. Even Yashoda did not remember. Rohini had found the baby beside her.

"You didn't have a son," Akrur told her gently. "You had a daughter who was switched with Devaki's son."

"No," Yashoda whispered. "No, no, no." She ran to Nand. He held her, tears coursing down his face, as their world collapsed around them.

"You must send Krishna with me to Mathura," Akrur told them.

"No!" Yashoda screamed, pushing Nand away. "Are you mad? Kansa will kill him."

"You cannot refuse," Akrur told her. "Kansa's soldiers surround Nandagaon as we speak. He will kill everyone in this village if you do not comply. But I have a plan," Akrur told them both. "I will find a way to take Krishna and Balaram

to safety and when they are safe, I will lead a revolt in Mathura to free Devaki and Vasudev.”

Nand and Yashoda rocked in each other’s arms, unable to imagine living without Krishna. How could they bear it? “He’s only eleven years old,” Yashoda said. “Can’t we keep him for a few more years?”

Akrur shook his head at them. “Imagine what Devaki and Vasudev have been bearing all these years. Consider how they have suffered. Don’t you think it’s time they were finally free? Don’t you think it’s time they finally met both their sons?”

Yashoda and Nand couldn’t argue. Much later, when they could speak without dissolving into tears, they called Krishna into the room and told him the news. They informed him that he and Balaram would go to Mathura with Akrur.

Krishna had known this was coming. He stayed calm and embraced his parents. “No matter where I go or what I do, I will always be your son,” he told them.

Every person in Vraj tried to stop Krishna from going. Some said he couldn’t go because the cows would stop giving milk. Some said he mustn’t go because the trees would stop bearing fruit. The *gopis* lay before his chariot and asked him to kill them with his wheels so they didn’t have to live without him. He lifted each of them up and told them that he would use their love as his strength. “You are all my inspiration,” he said.

The last person Krishna saw was Radha. She waited for him by the road as Akrur’s chariot rolled towards her.

“Who is that?” Akrur asked Krishna, slowing the horses.

“That is my heart,” Krishna said softly. He jumped down from the chariot and ran to her.

She gazed at him as he came close. They both knew that this was their final farewell.

“I won’t stop you,” she said. “You have much work to do in the world. You must go to protect our devotees.”

Krishna looked down at her tender feet, dusty from the road.

“I only want you to know,” Radha said, “that you are in my every thought, my every breath. I live for you and only you. Don’t forget me, Krishna.”

“How can I forget myself?” Krishna asked her. “I am you and you are me. Without Radha there is no Krishna because you are my heart and soul. Give Vraj love in my stead, Radha. Be me for them.” He took out his flute and gave it to her. “This is yours now. I have no more reason to play it without you.”

She shook her head. “Keep it. It will speak to you on my behalf.”

“Then that is what it shall do, Radha,” Krishna said. “From this day forth, my flute shall remain silent to all but you and I.”

They gazed at each other one final time and then Krishna climbed onto the chariot and went away.



15. Krishna is Recognized

Krishna rode towards Mathura, accompanied by Akrur and Balaram. They were surrounded by Kansa's men, who were stationed ahead and around them, ensuring that there could be no escape.

A few hours into their ride, Akrur halted the chariot alongside the Yamuna. "Wait here," he told the boys. "I must bathe."

"Bathe?" Balaram asked. "Didn't you have a bath before we left Nandagaon?"

Akrur slanted a look at Balaram. "Quiet, Prince," he whispered. "I go to leave a message for my men."

"By the river?" Krishna said.

Akrur nodded. "I must command them to attack the soldiers around us so I can take you both to safety." He stripped off the outer layer of his clothes and stepped down to the riverbank.

Krishna and Balaram exchanged a glance. "You haven't told him?" Balaram asked Krishna, who shook his head.

"I'll tell him now," Krishna said.

Akrur, to convince Kansa's men, dived into the river. He opened his eyes

under the green water and saw something strange at the river bottom. There was something, or someone there. In a few downward strokes, Akrur was close enough to see and he gasped, almost drowning himself. He struggled to the surface and coughed and spluttered into the air. He turned to Krishna and Balaram who were still in the chariot, waiting patiently. It couldn't be! Akrur thought. He'd been confused. Taking a breath, Akrur went back under the water to check.

There it was again. Akrur kicked himself up to the water's surface and looked at where he'd left the boys. Krishna and Balaram waved from the chariot, smiling at him.

Akrur blinked, realization dawning in his eyes. He went back under the waves and stared.

At the bottom of the Yamuna river was Krishna. Except that Krishna did not look like a simple cowherd. He was seated upon a serpent throne, dressed in divine gems, a flashing golden robe, and a diamond crown. Serpent heads loomed over him, like the umbrella of a king. And around him were adoring servants, pressing his feet, offering him food, dancing, singing his praises. Even Balaram was there. Under the water!

Krishna, Akrur thought. *Who are you?*

You know, answered a voice inside his head. *Akrur. You know who I am.*

Akrur had been swimming against the current but now it seemed as if he floated to the river bottom. He stood upon the silt and pebbles, facing Krishna on his throne. *Lord*, Akrur thought. He fell to his knees. *My Lord.*

Krishna smiled at him. Akrur was then floating upwards. His head broke the water's surface. He climbed up the bank and stood in shock, dripping water onto the ground.

From the chariot, Balaram called: "Are you done, Akrurji?"

Slowly, Akrur turned around and looked up at where Krishna and Balaram stood, as if the vision in the water had never happened. "Yes," Akrur whispered, gazing at Krishna. "I'm done."

The rest of the ride to Mathura was quiet. Akrur hadn't left a message for his

men. He now knew that Krishna didn't need to be saved. He was the savior.

When they arrived in Mathura, the city came to a standstill. Word spread like fire that the savior had arrived. Devaki's eighth child had come home!

Everywhere he went, Krishna was mobbed by the people and he greeted them all, embracing them. Akrur went ahead to the *yajna* arena to inform Kansa that Krishna was here.

Walking around the city, Krishna saw one lady, a hunchback. He moved away from the crowd to go to her. "Can I have some of your sandalwood paste?" he asked, referring to the plate of sandalwood she carried in her hand.

The hunchback, Kubja, was young but appeared old. She had rough skin and frazzled hair, and hands that were gnarled and crooked. She was shocked that someone as beautiful as Krishna would come near her because most people turned away from her ugliness in horror. Then she thought that he must be like all the other boys who bullied her because of how she looked. "I make this sandalwood paste for the king," she said, holding the plate away, trying to move around him.

He blocked her. "Can't you spare just a little for me, beautiful lady?"

At those words, Kubja stopped and turned to him. "How can you be so cruel as to say I'm beautiful? Everyone knows I'm ugly. You don't have to remind me!" Her eyes filled with tears and again she tried to move around him but Krishna again blocked her path.

"You are beautiful. I spoke the truth!" he said. "You are kind and patient and honest. You are generous and loving and you never hurt anyone even if they have hurt you. Your heart is pure and that is why I say you are beautiful."

Kubja listened in dawning wonder. *How do you know me?* she thought. *Who are you?*

You know, whispered a voice inside her head. *Kubja. You know who I am.*

Her heart flipped in her chest. "Lord," she whispered. "My Lord." She held up her plate of sandalwood, offering it to him.

Krishna smiled. "Will you apply it for me?"

Amazed that he would let her touch him, Kubja took paste on her fingertips and applied it to his forehead. It would cool him in the hot sun and give a lovely sweet scent. She took more paste and applied it over his arms, his chest, his back, protecting him from the heat and dust. With the last bit, she bent her crooked body to smooth the paste over his toes. At his feet, Kubja surrendered her heart, mind, and soul to him.

Krishna raised her to stand and for once, Kubja's back did not hurt. He made her stand straight, tall, the way others stood. She looked down at her body and saw that her skin was smooth, her hair soft. Her hands were refined and elegant, and when she touched them to her face, she knew every bit of her was different.

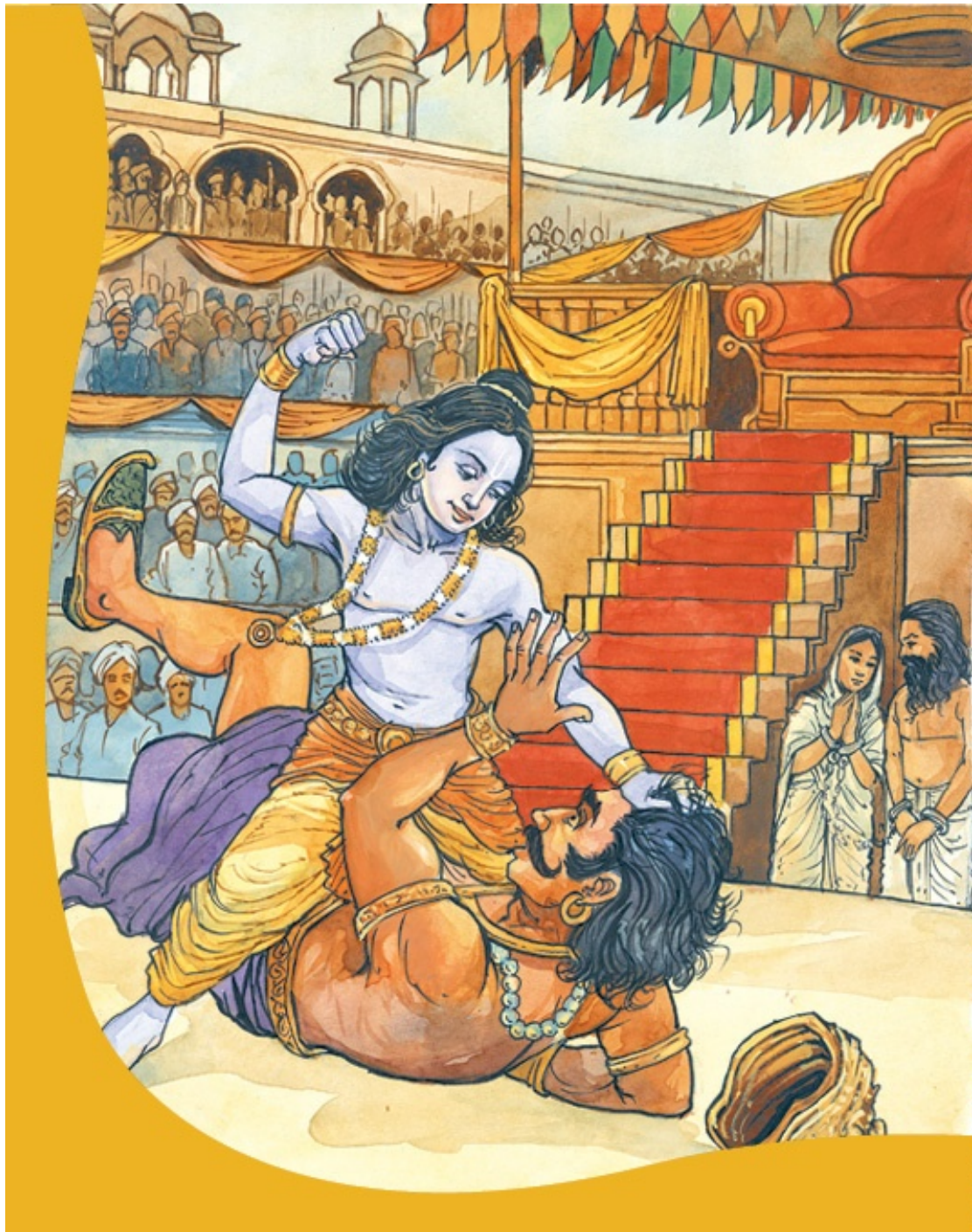
"What did you do?" she cried, looking at Krishna.

"Nothing. I just made your outside reflect your inside."

The watching crowd saw it all and they cried out praises to Krishna. Sweeping him onto their shoulders, they carried him through the streets of the city. They swept up Balaram also and soon they came to the *yajna* arena, where Kansa was holding court.

The people set Krishna and Balaram on the ground. Together, they entered the arena.

Kansa's entire court was assembled there, as well as many guests who had come from around the kingdom to join the *yajna* celebrations. Up on the dais was Kansa himself who looked down at the crowd entering the arena. He spotted Krishna immediately because Krishna's dark skin and lotus eyes were so bright, it seemed that sparks came from him. Krishna was small, just a child compared to Kansa's form of a powerful warrior, yet Kansa began shaking.



He murmured an order to his servant and the man rushed down the steps to inform the guards. Soon, all of Kansa's warriors were surrounding Krishna, ready to kill him. Krishna and Balaram knocked heads together, slamming their enemies into the ground. In moments, Kansa's most fearsome warriors were defeated, strewn over the earth like dead leaves.

Kansa's war elephant, who had been intoxicated with wine, charged Krishna. The Lord was merciful and stopped it with one hand, ending its tormented

life.

Then there were more soldiers but Balaram fought them, leaving the way clear for Krishna to get to Kansa.

The king rose from his throne, dread filling his stomach like wine filling the elephant. He roared in fury. Pulling his sword from his scabbard, Kansa charged Krishna.

Devaki's eighth child grabbed Kansa's arm and flipped him onto his back. The mortal enemies wrestled, one moment Krishna on top, the next, Kansa. Then Krishna was over Kansa, his arm over Kansa's throat, choking the life from him.

Kansa tried to breathe, to suck in air, but he couldn't. His lungs squeezed, his heart pounded, and he looked up into Krishna's eyes.

Who are you? Kansa wondered.

You know, said a voice inside his head. *Kansa. You know who I am.*

In the midst of his terror, Kansa finally knew. *Lord*, he thought, as the life slipped from his body. *My Lord*.

Krishna stood above Kansa's corpse. Akrur came rushing towards him.

"Akrurji," Krishna said softly. "Where are my parents?"



युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु ।
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥

*yuktāhāra-vihārasya yukta-cheṣṭasya karmasu
yukta-svapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkha-hā*

But those who are temperate in eating and recreation, balanced in work, and regulated in sleep, can mitigate all sorrows by practicing Yog.

Bhagavad Gita 6.17



16. Facing Destiny

The cell door groaned as it swung open. It was so dark. Krishna squinted as he gazed inside.

“Who is it?” a male voice said.

“It’s too early for our meal,” a female voice answered.

Krishna stepped into the cell, holding a torch.

Huddled in the corner by a tiny earthen deity of Vishnu, Devaki and Vasudev sat in prayer. They were dressed in dirty prison cotton, their faces lined with age and grief. They blinked up at him in the glow of the torch.

“Who are you, child?” Vasudev asked Krishna.

“Why is a child in this dungeon?” Devaki asked her husband. “Where is your mother?” she asked Krishna.

Krishna swallowed. “I’m looking at my mother.”

It took a moment for Devaki and Vasudev to understand. They leaped to their feet. “Go!” Devaki whispered, panic in her voice. “Before they find you!”

“Quickly, son!” Vasudev said, moving to push him out the door.

Krishna resisted, catching Vasudev's hands to stay him. "Wait-"

"No waiting!" Devaki ordered. "How could Yashoda have let you come here?"

"But-"

"No buts!" Vasudev commanded. "Your uncle Kansa will kill you. Go!"

Akrur stepped into the cell, holding another torch. "Kansa will never harm anyone ever again."

Devaki and Vasudev stared at him. "What?" they whispered.

"It's true. Your son has saved us all."

The look of stunned confusion on both their faces was clear, despite the darkness. Then Devaki stepped forward. "My brother is dead?" she said, her voice soft.

"Yes. He and many of his evil men."

Vasudev and Devaki stood there, unable to process what they were hearing. Together, they turned to Krishna.

"You did it?" Devaki asked him.

Krishna swallowed again. "I didn't want to," he said. "But I had to do it, to free you."

With a gasp, his parents pulled him to them. Devaki covered his face with kisses and his father squeezed him tight. Together they rocked and laughed and wept. "My baby," Devaki said over and over. "My sweet baby. I thought you'd forgotten us."

"I never forgot you," Krishna said. He looked at Vasudev. "You thought that I was the reason you both lived. But you both are the reason *I* live."

His parents wept and hugged him, not wanting to let go. They'd waited so many years for this moment. Then Balaram joined them, and Devaki and Vasudev finally met their seventh son also.

That very day Krishna freed King Ugrasen from Kansa's secret prison and reinstalled him on the throne. Kansa's allies throughout the kingdom tried to flee but Krishna and Balaram rounded them up and Ugrasen held trials to give

the people justice.

Rohini came to join them from Nandagaon and their family was finally together.

Pandu, in forest exile, heard the news while sitting with the sages and he rushed home to Kunti.

“You see?” Kunti said, her eyes shining with joy. “Did I not tell you he was the Lord? Did I not say he lifted Mount Goverdhan?”

Pandu nodded. “My sons,” he said, calling the boys into the hut. They ran in to him from their play.

“Your brother Krishna has won a great victory for dharma,” Pandu said to them. “We must celebrate this triumph with prayer and thanksgiving.”

“Krishna is your brother, my own nephew,” Kunti told their sons, “but he is also the Supreme Lord. You must take shelter in him always.”

The Pandavas gathered around Kunti, their little hands gripping her sari. “The Supreme Lord is our brother?” Yudhishtira asked.

She nodded. “He is my brother Vasudev’s son. One day you will meet him and when you do, you will love him and he will love you.”

The boys were very excited, jumping up and down and dancing round the hut. Kunti and Madri cooked simple foods from their forest provisions but their family’s joy was such that it seemed to Pandu like decadent feasting.

Meanwhile in Mathura, the sage who’d made the prophecy was freed from the dungeon, along with countless other sages. The women Kansa had abducted were returned to their families. The wealth Kansa had stolen from the people was redistributed to build new roads and bridges and buildings, so the people could prosper once more.

Mathura was restored to her former glory as the capital of the Yadu clan and after some time, Krishna and Balaram were sent to Sage Sandipani’s *ashram* for their studies.

Pandu’s family heard each piece of news and rejoiced again and again.

Each day in the forest, Pandu would sit each of his sons on his knee and teach

them how to be honorable men. "You must learn in every moment," he told Sahadev. "You must look for dharma in every situation," he instructed Yudhishthira. "You must see the Lord in every event," he revealed to Arjun. To Bheem, Pandu showed a handful of dust. "We are all made of this," he told Bheem, "no matter how strong we are individually. We are all the same from the same creator." And Nakul, he hugged close. "Beauty is in the soul, not in any face," Pandu said to him. "Always search for that beauty, my boy."

One day, Pandu was meditating in a clearing surrounded by trees. His sons were learning scripture from the forest sages that day so Pandu sat by the waterfall, concentrating his mind on the Almighty. He sensed Madri walk by, heading to the waterfall to bathe, and Pandu turned to watch her.

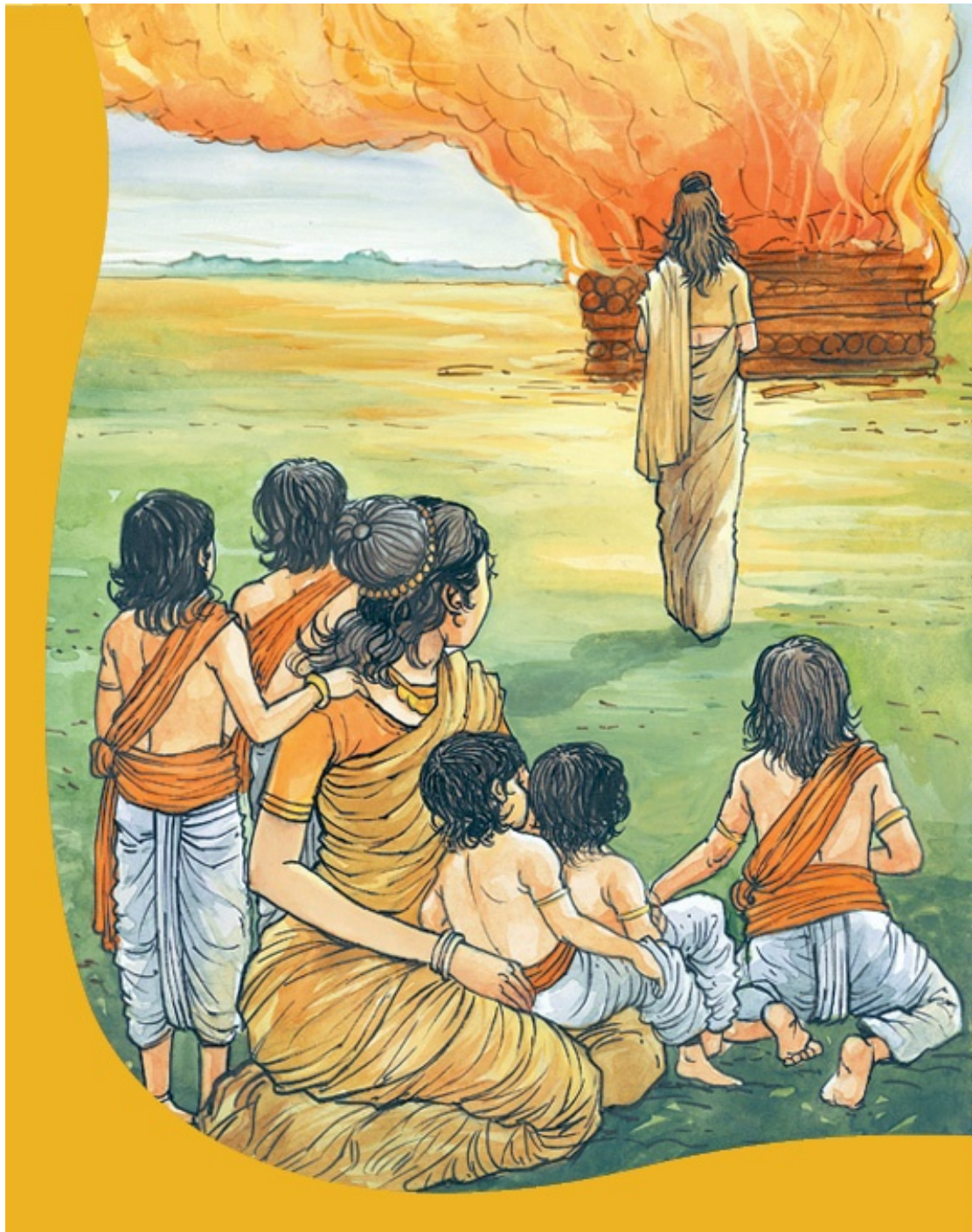
It had been years since Sage Kindam had cursed him. Years since he had embraced either Kunti or Madri. The three of them were happy together with their sons but it was so hard to go through life without showing his wives that he loved them. It wasn't their fault he'd made such an error. They shouldn't have to suffer such a curse.

Madri finished her bath and was passing him to go back to the hut.

"My dear," Pandu whispered.

She started, having thought him still in meditation. "My lord?"

"I miss you," he said.



She pressed her lips together. "I miss you too."

He rose from his seat. "Come to me."

She took a step back, shaking her head.

He came closer. "Come here."

She backed away. "My lord, it's dangerous."

“I just want to hold you. I love you, my lady,” he stepped closer.

She looked as if she was close to tears, shaking her head. “I love you too. I miss you so much. But it’s dangerous! What if-?”

He touched her shoulder, then her arm, pulling her closer. “Just a moment. Just once. That’s all I want.”

Kunti was preparing lunch when she heard the scream.

“KUNTI!”

She leaped to her feet, abandoning the cooking fire to run towards Madri’s voice. She came upon the clearing and the waterfall, and saw Pandu on the ground with Madri crouched beside him.

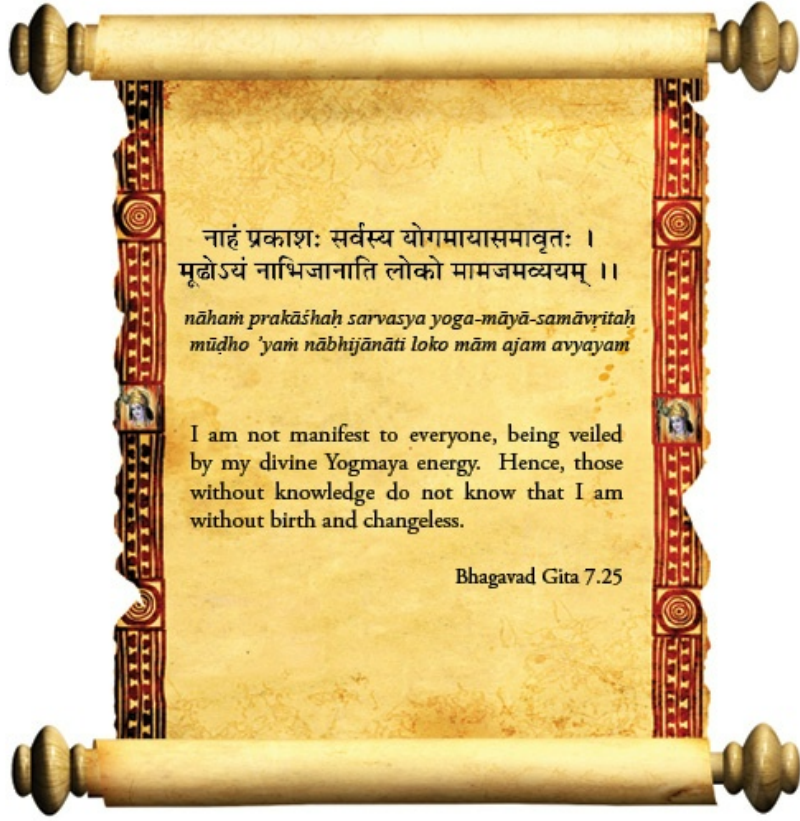
Madri looked up at her, tears streaming down her face. “I tried to stop him, Elder Sister! I tried. He didn’t listen.”

Pandu was gone, true to Kindam’s curse. Madri felt the guilt of his death so deeply that she sat upon his funeral pyre and died with him. Her last words to Kunti were a plea that Kunti take care of Nakul and Sahadev for her.

Kunti was bereft. She was a widow with five sons and no home. Pandu’s friends, the sages, came to take them all to Hastinapur.

“That is their true destiny,” they said to her of her sons, the Pandavas. “They must return to the capital of the Bharat clan.”

Bheeshma met them at the city gates. He hugged Pandu’s sons to him and comforted Kunti on her loss. “Come to the palace,” Bheeshma told them all. “Hastinapur is waiting for you.”



नाहं प्रकाशः सर्वस्य योगमायासमावृतः ।
मूढेऽयं नाभिजानाति लोको मामजमव्ययम् ॥

*nāham prakāśhaḥ sarvasya yoga-māyā-samāvṛtaḥ
mūḍho 'yaṁ nābhijānāti loko mām ajam avyayam*

I am not manifest to everyone, being veiled
by my divine Yogmaya energy. Hence, those
without knowledge do not know that I am
without birth and changeless.

Bhagavad Gita 7.25



17. Blessing in Disguise

When the Pandavas entered the palace, they met their cousins, the Kauravas, who were one hundred brothers as strong as their father Dhritarashtra. The story of their birth was a strange one.

Gandhari had served Sage Vyas when he came to visit Hastinapur and he'd been so pleased with her dedication that he said: "May you have one hundred sons."

She became pregnant and, not long after Yudhishtir was born, Gandhari went into labor. However, instead of bearing a child she gave birth to a ball of flesh. Bewildered and heartbroken, Gandhari told her maids to throw it away.

That was when Sage Vyas arrived again at the palace. "Fear not, daughter," Vyas said to her. "Your sons came out too soon but they shall each be as strong as your husband."

"Sons?" Gandhari asked incredulously, pointing at the ball of flesh.

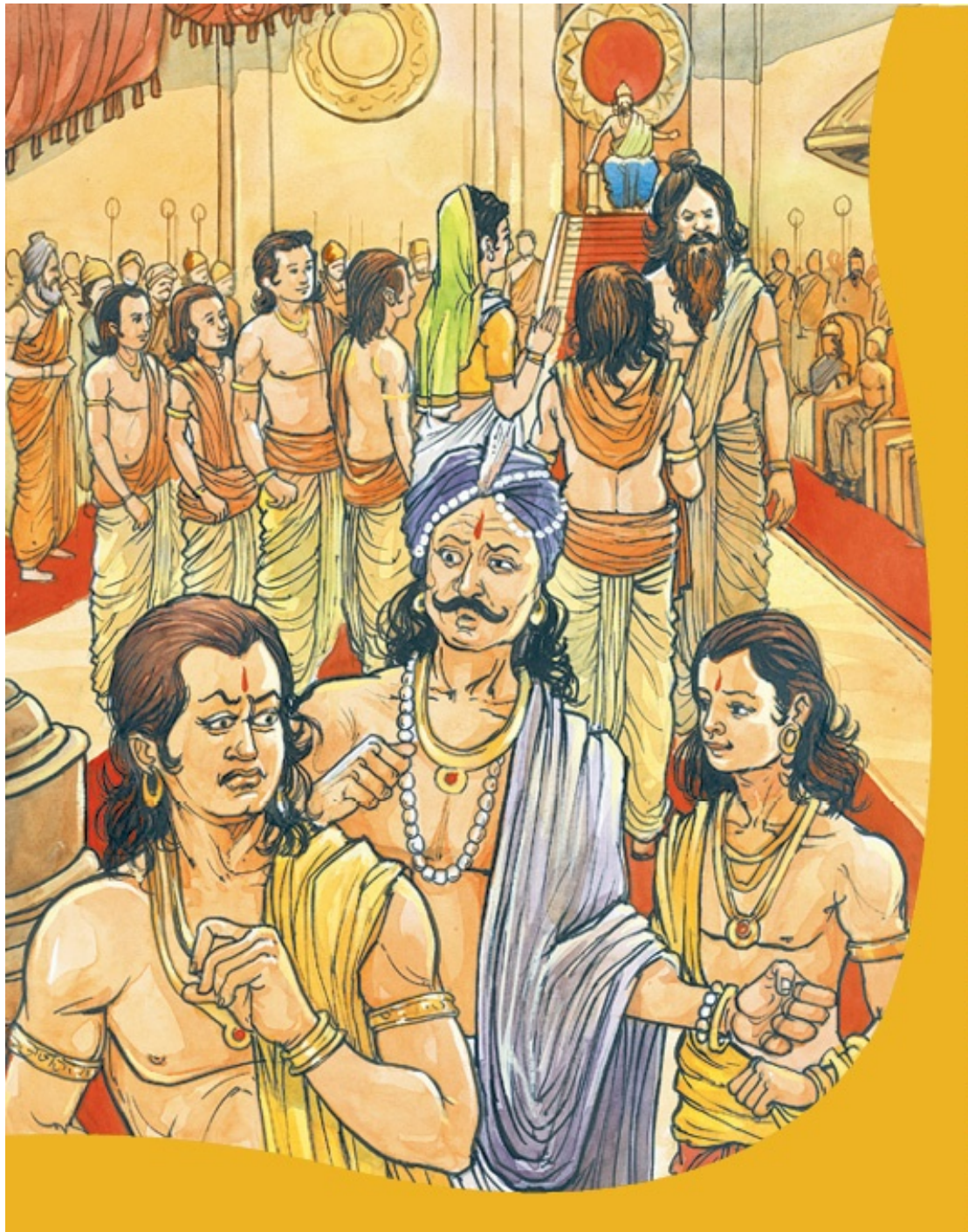
Even as she pointed, the ball was breaking apart, falling into tiny pieces. "Divide them up," Vyas ordered, "and put each piece into a covered clay pot filled with *ghee*. Keep the pots in a warm room, as warm as their mother's body. There will be a hundred fetuses in all and as the pots break, that will

signify who is eldest and who is youngest.”

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra did as ordered and the first pot to break was Duryodhan, their eldest, born at the same time as Kunti's Bheem. Next came Dushasan and it went on and on until all hundred sons were born, called the Kauravas after their Kuru ancestors.

As they grew, Dhritarashtra told his sons that Duryodhan would be the next king of Hastinapur so when Pandu's sons arrived the Kauravas were filled with jealousy. They hated Yudhishtir who was elder to Duryodhan, and they especially hated Bheem who was stronger than any of them.

Duryodhan and Dushasan liked to spend time with their uncle Shakuni, who always resented that his sister was married to blind Dhritarashtra. Shakuni often told his nephews how the throne was their father's by right. He said that Pandu had usurped their father's position and that the people had let him, which was a grave injustice. As a result, the Kauravas ordered their people around with great arrogance. They condescended to speak to underlings if they wanted but ignored anyone they felt wasn't good enough. They were certain that Duryodhan was the natural heir to Hastinapur, as their father Dhritarashtra and Uncle Shakuni had told them.

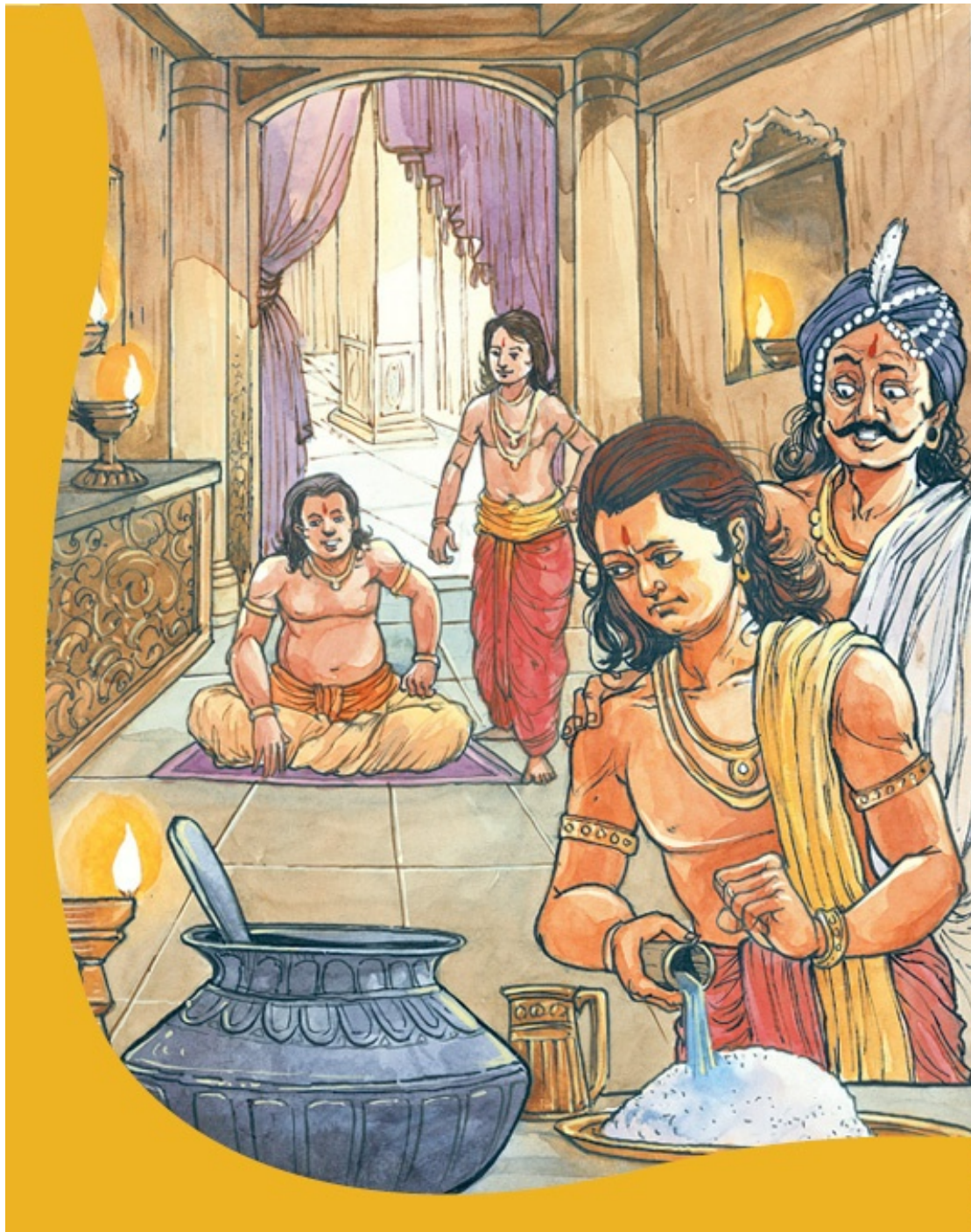


Pandu, on the other hand, had told his sons that they must work hard to be worthy of the throne. "In the Bharat clan," he said to Yudhishtira, "the heir is chosen by the people when he has proven his worth through service." The Pandavas, therefore, were humble. They had been brought up in the simplicity of the forest so they saw no difference between themselves and the people. They were kind and gracious and wanted to help everyone. They became friends with all, from Pundits to servants to rich landowners.

The Pandavas tried to make friends with the Kauravas by playing with them, sharing meals with them, talking to them but the Kauravas turned a cold shoulder every time. Bheem became sick of it. "Why should we be nice when they're not?" he asked when Yudhishtir rebuked him for rudeness towards the Kauravas.

Yudhishtir told his younger brothers that they needed to try harder to become friends. "We are all sons of our motherland," he told them. "And when the Bharat clan is strong, Hastinapur is strong."

His words were on Bheem's mind when Duryodhan, out of the blue, invited Bheem to lunch. Bheem would never have agreed normally, but this day Bheem said yes, wanting to do something good for Hastinapur.



Duryodhan served rice pudding which was Bheem's favorite. Duryodhan, on the advice of Shakuni, had laced it with poison in a plot to destroy the Pandavas' strongest brother. Duryodhan and Dushasan watched Bheem take each bite, smiling. When Bheem fell unconscious, his color fading, his heart slowing, they stood over his body in triumph. Quickly, they bound Bheem up in a straw mat and took him down to the Yamuna river, rolling him into the water. They thought that even if he wasn't dead yet, he would drown and his body would wash downstream, leaving no evidence of their crime.

Smirking, they returned to the palace and waited for an alarm to rise that Bheem was missing. It wasn't long. Kunti was frantic when Bheem didn't return from playing and went immediately to Gandhari for help.

Gandhari was concerned and sent out soldiers to look for Bheem. Unlike her husband and sons, she'd never thought that Duryodhan was the natural heir to Hastinapur. She hoped he would prove himself worthy of being king but Gandhari in no way wished ill on the Pandavas. They were her nephews and she loved them, as any aunt should.

She called each of the boys to her, asking them where they'd last seen Bheem. The Pandavas said they'd last seen him walking away with Duryodhan.

"We ate lunch together," Duryodhan said, shrugging his shoulders. "You said I should be nice to him so I invited him, but after lunch he just wandered off without even thanking me for the food. I don't know where he went. He probably fell asleep somewhere, you know how much he eats."

Gandhari kept the soldiers out searching and stayed with Kunti to provide moral support. Kunti prayed to Krishna, asking him to protect her son.

Bheem, in the meantime, had sunk close to the bottom of the river where serpents roamed. They bit him and their venom acted as antidote to the poison already in his bloodstream. Bheem awoke. Seeing so many snakes surrounding him, Bheem knocked them away. He defeated many of them until they were able to bind his hands, bringing him to their king to be tried for disturbing the peace.

Naag Raj was curled upon his rock throne, his black scaly body contrasting with the white of the rock. He was surrounded by servants, all smaller than he. He looked upon the boy. "Why did our venom not kill you, human, and how can you breathe underwater?"

Bheem looked at the snake as if it was crazy. "I'm a child, how should I know?"

"Who are you?" the king demanded to know.

"I'm Bheem, son of Kunti."

Naag Raj's eyes bulged. "Kunti? Kunti's son?" He slithered from his throne and assumed human form, tall and powerful. "Then you are my great-

grandson!"

Bheem gaped at him, not believing what he was seeing. "I'm your what?"

Naag Raj glowed with light, his black eyes like pools of water. "My great-grandson! I am Naag Raj. Your mother Kunti is my daughter's daughter. That's why you can breathe underwater!"

Bheem was still trying to work it all out in his head when his great-grandfather continued firing questions at him. Why was Bheem in the river? Why did their serpent's venom not kill him? Where was Kunti? Where were his brothers?

Bheem tried to answer and through his stilted responses, Naag Raj worked out Duryodhan's plot. "So, the Kauravas wish to kill you, do they?" he said, stroking his chin in thought. He snapped his fingers at a servant who also changed into human form. Naag Raj whispered something to him and the servant slipped away. He returned carrying a bowl of what looked like rice pudding.

Bheem's stomach growled as his great-grandfather handed him the sweet-smelling dish. "This is a special sweet. One bowl will give the strength of ten thousand elephants. Eat as much as you can." Bheem happily ate seven bowls and his elder smiled at him. "Good," Naag Raj said. "Now no poison will ever be able to harm you. We must get you back to Kunti now for she will be worried."

Bheem nodded.

It was late. Naag Raj sent Bheem back to the palace with a guard of elite serpent warriors, who explained to Kunti that Bheem had been visiting his great-grandsire. The search party was called home at last.

Kunti clasped Bheem to her before everyone, shaking with relief.

"It was Duryodhan," Bheem said. "He put-"

"Bheem!" Yudhishtir interrupted him.

Gandhari was bewildered, wondering why Bheem would blame Duryodhan but she knew Bheem wasn't a liar. "What's the matter, my dear?" she said to Bheem. "You can speak."

Bheem looked again at Yudhishtir. "Nothing, Elder Mother," Bheem said to Gandhari, his voice respectful. "We had an argument, that's all."

She sighed. "I'm not pleased with Duryodhan for arguing with you. I will talk to him."

"Yes, Elder Mother," Bheem said quietly.

"It's time for sleeping," Kunti said abruptly. "Come, Bheem, I won't be at peace until you're safely in your bed."

Everyone returned to their own quarters and alone, the Pandavas and Kunti listened as Bheem told them the truth. "Why did you stop me telling everyone?" Bheem asked Yudhishtir.

"Because I already knew that Duryodhan had done something to you," Yudhishtir said, shaking his head. "We can't have the whole kingdom knowing."

"But why?" Arjun asked. "It's the truth. Duryodhan is a murderer."

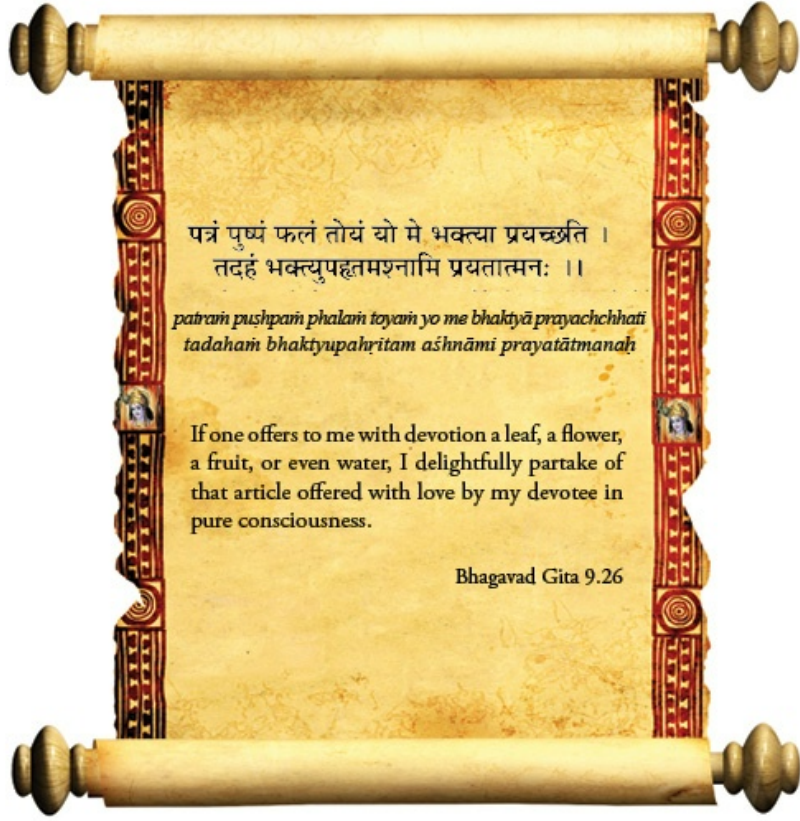
"What do you think will happen if Hastinapur's enemies find out that princes in the Bharat clan are conspiring against each other?" Yudhishtir asked. "How will the people react if they find out their own king's son is capable of such an act?" He shook his head. "Duryodhan has done something dreadful but we cannot let our motherland suffer for it. Internal disputes shared publicly become a weakness in our enemies' minds. Weakness leads to attack and attack leads to defeat."

"Yudhishtir is correct," Kunti said. "And to let the Kauravas know that you suspect them puts all of your lives in danger. We must keep what we know a secret to protect you and Hastinapur. Is that understood?" Her sons nodded and she closed her eyes, tears coursing down her cheeks. "I can only thank Krishna for his mercy today. How else would my Grandsire be there to save Bheem?"

Bheem went to her and she hugged him tight. "Don't worry, Mother," he said to her. "I ate the sweet and am even stronger than before. Seventy-thousand elephants stronger!"

Kunti kissed Bheem's brow and clasped him to her again. "Thank you, Lord,"

she wept.



पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति ।
तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मनः ॥

*patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyaṁ yo me bhaktiā prayachchhati
tadaham bhaktyupahṛitam aśhnāmi prayatātmanah*

If one offers to me with devotion a leaf, a flower,
a fruit, or even water, I delightfully partake of
that article offered with love by my devotee in
pure consciousness.

Bhagavad Gita 9.26



18. A True Archer

When Bheeshma and Vidur heard about Bheem's strange disappearance and then reappearance, they were worried. They weren't fools. They saw the Kauravas' animosity towards the Pandavas.

Bheeshma decided that something had to be done. It was time the boys were all sent to school and kept under the watchful guidance of a guru. Bheeshma himself, however, was far too busy aiding Dhritarashtra in running the kingdom to have time to teach the boys.

The family guru, Kripacharya, also spent a great deal of time advising the king. Lately, since the Pandavas had arrived, it seemed as if Dhritarashtra wouldn't leave Kripacharya in peace to teach them. Every day he made some excuse to call the guru away from lessons.

Bheeshma searched for another option.

The boys, in the meantime, had a lot of free hours. They spent days playing and getting into fights. One day, while playing catch, their ball fell into a well.

They ran to peer inside and see what could be done to save it.

While they were all looking downwards, a big dusty man approached them. "What are you all looking at?"

Yudhishthir immediately pulled his younger brothers behind him. They stared up at the stranger, who peered into the well.

“Ah, I see,” he said, noting the ball bobbing in the water. “Get me some grass,” he said to no one in particular. Arjun was curious and he shook off Yudhishthir’s hold to fetch some long dry grass.

The big man pulled one thick yellow grass stalk free and pinched the end, making it pointy and sharp. He then threw it into the well and to the boys’ shock, it pierced the ball, sticking straight up. The man selected another grass stalk, this one a little thinner, and threw that too. It pierced the first so that they were now joined, one on top of the other. He threw another and another and another, so that they became a chain, linking all the way up to the stranger’s hands. And then he reached in and gently pulled the chain up, bringing the ball out of the well.

Duryodhan grabbed it and ran away, his brothers following. The Pandavas remained by the stranger, staring up at him in wonder.

“Who are you?” Yudhishthir asked.

“I am Dronacharya,” the man answered.

Bheeshma had sent for Dronacharya, son of Sage Bharadwaj and disciple of Sage Parashuram, to be the princes’ new instructor.

Acharya meant a master of all learning and Dronacharya educated them in all subjects. Scripture, ethics, weaponry, warfare, politics, animals, agriculture, science, mathematics. It seemed there was no end to the subjects Drona was expert in. One day, he took the princes into the forest and seated them around a tall tree.

“In this tree,” he told them, “I have hidden a parrot. Can you see it?”

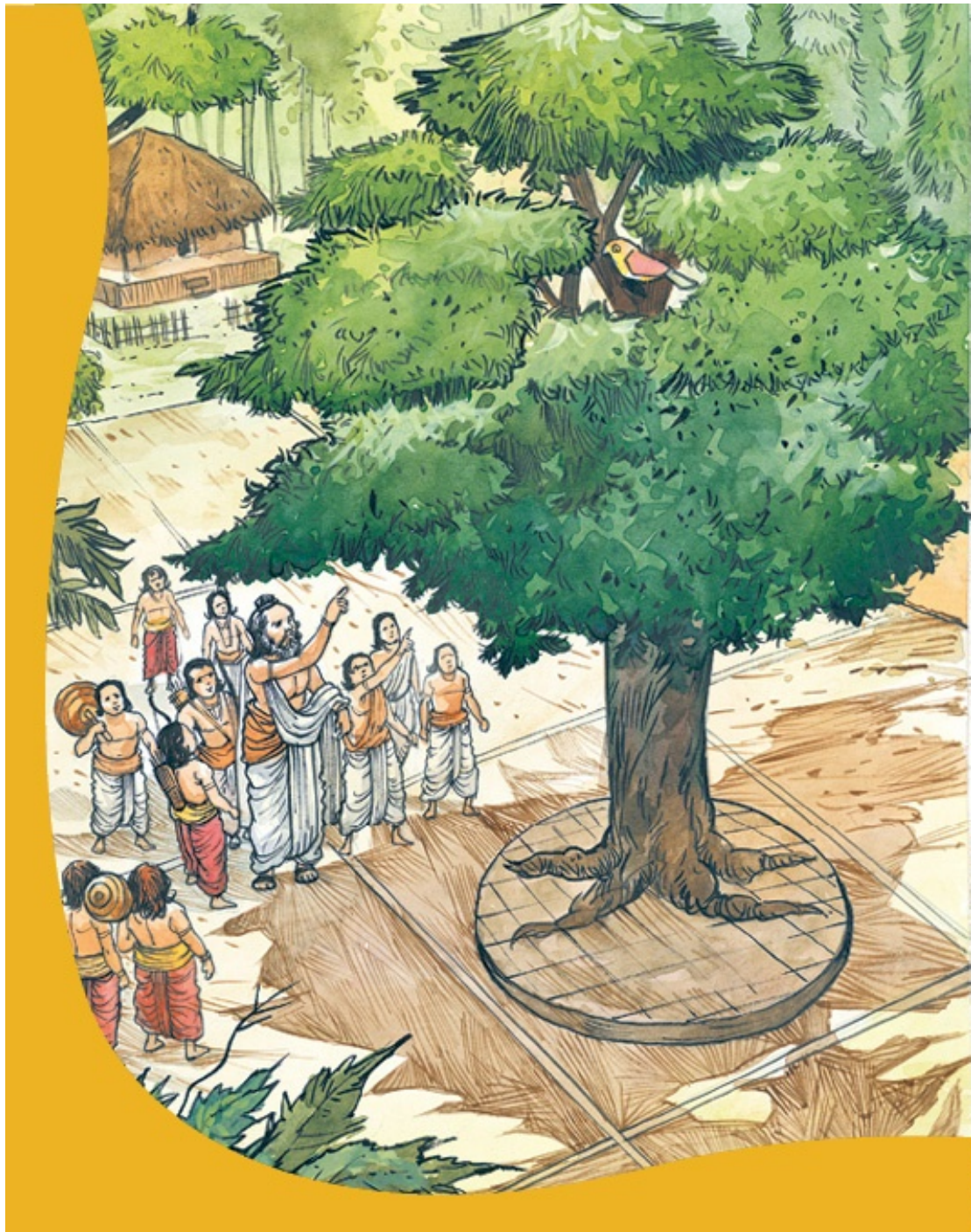
The boys squinted and strained and one-by-one they all nodded. High up on a branch was fixed a wooden parrot, with a green body and orange beak, painted so vividly it almost looked real.

Calling each prince by turn, Drona told them all to kneel under the tree and aim their arrow at the bird. “What do you see?” he would ask them as they took aim.

Many answered that they saw the tree, the sky, the clouds, the leaves, and Drona told them all to lower their bows. Finally it was Arjun's turn. "I see the wooden parrot," Arjun said.

"Hmmm," Drona said. "Only the parrot?"

"Yes, Gurudev. But now I see only the parrot's head."



“And now?”

“Now I see only its left eye.”

Drona clasped his hands behind his back. “Shoot.”

Arjun released his arrow and with a whoosh, the bird was tumbling from the tree, Arjun’s arrow embedded in its left eye.

Drona held it for the boys to examine. “A true archer sees nothing but his

target. In this life there are many distractions. Family, friends, enemies, lovers. Let nothing distract you from your goal. Your ability to focus is your greatest weapon. Use it and become a true archer.”

School continued and the boys soaked up all Drona had to teach them. Drona’s son Ashwatthama had come to join them in the school and in the time that the princes spent playing, Drona would privately teach Ashwatthama.

When Arjun saw this, he left the game. “What are you doing, Gurudev?”

“Teaching. What are you doing, Arjun?”

“Learning,” Arjun said, sitting by Ashwatthama.

Drona raised his eyebrows. “Don’t you want to play with the other boys?”

“Not if you’re teaching,” Arjun said. He leaned into the diagram Drona had drawn, a complex battle stratagem only the most skilled warriors knew.

Drona eyed Arjun before turning back to the lesson.

One night as the boys were all eating, Bheem told Arjun that he could eat in the dark which made Arjun laugh. “How can you eat in the dark?” he asked Bheem. “You wouldn’t be able to see the food or your own hand.”

Bheem laughed back. “Practice, dear Arjun. With practice perfect aim is possible.”

Bheem’s words made Arjun pause. “Practice,” he repeated. He thought about it all evening. With practice perfect aim was possible...

That night, when everyone else was asleep, Arjun sneaked out of the student’s dormitory. The night air was soft and black. Quietly, Arjun found his way by touch to the weapons hut. He didn’t want to make any noise and awaken Gurudev. His mother had emphatically told him that a good disciple never disturbed the guru in sleep.

Arjun pulled the first bow and quiver off the pile that he could reach and went to the field to where he knew the practice targets were. He used his hands to feel the hay-filled circular target. Then he moved back twenty paces.

At first, he strained his eyes, thinking he could see the dark shape before him.

He shot his arrow and rushed to see where he'd hit. He'd missed completely.

Returning to his spot, he thought of how the bow felt in his hands when he drew his arrow, how steady his arm was when he knew his aim was correct. He closed his eyes, and visualized the target in his mind, remembering the steps he'd taken from it.

Focus, he thought. Practice.

Over and over, throughout the night, Arjun took aim at the hay-stuffed circle. Dawn was just creeping over the horizon when his quiver ran empty. The target was filled with his arrows, each one closer and closer to the center.

"What are you doing?" came Drona's voice from behind him.

Arjun whipped around, guilt written all over his face. "Forgive me, Gurudev," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you. I just wanted to practice my archery."

"In the dark?"

Arjun didn't want to get Bheem in trouble. "I heard somewhere that with practice we can have perfect aim even in the dark."

Drona walked to him, then glanced at the target that was embedded with so many arrows. He studied it in silence.

Arjun felt that he'd made a serious mistake. "Forgive me, Gurudev. I—"

"Why do you want to be a good archer, Arjun?" Drona asked, interrupting.

Arjun thought for a moment, remembering something Yudhishtir often said. "We are servants of Hastinapur and dharma," he said. "It's my duty as a warrior to protect them both. That's why I want to be a good archer."

"Hmmm," Drona said. "You don't want glory. Or fame?"

"To serve is glory enough for me."

Drona scrutinized Arjun. "You have a quality my other students lack."

Arjun blinked.



“You don’t just accept what I give you. You seek every lesson. You look for new ways to learn and you don’t even do it for yourself. You do it for dharma. Such a quality is called excellence.”

Arjun bowed his head, humbled that Drona should give him such high praise.

“You wish to protect Hastinapur?” Drona asked him and Arjun nodded. “Then you shall,” Drona said. “I will make you the greatest archer this world has ever seen.”

The sun was rising over the horizon behind Drona, outlining his body with light.

“Gurudev,” Arjun whispered, amazed at this honor.

Drona put his hand on Arjun’s shoulder. “You shall be the greatest archer this world has ever seen. I swear it.”



19. Crisis

Each day Drona would take his disciples down to the river to bathe. He would enter the water first and perform his prayers, then the boys would take their baths as he supervised. For Drona, it was an important time of day for his students, just as important as their lessons. Morning was a quiet time, filled with peace and stillness, when his disciples were at their most content. Much could be learned at such a time, he knew.

One morning, Drona entered the shallow water as his disciples stood on the bank and watched. He cupped sacred water in his hands and offered it to the sun, chanting ancient mantras.

He moved his foot slightly in the water, seeking purchase in the pebbles and silt. He found what he sought and continued to chant, his eyes closed.

The boys sat on the bank, faint morning light gathering around them. Arjun cupped his chin in his hands and closed his eyes too, feeling the sway of the tree branches above him.

Then he sensed Nakul start beside him. "What?" Arjun said.

Nakul jumped up, yelling and pointing, Sahadev doing the same.

That was when Arjun saw it, a monstrous crocodile at least twelve feet long,

heading for Drona.

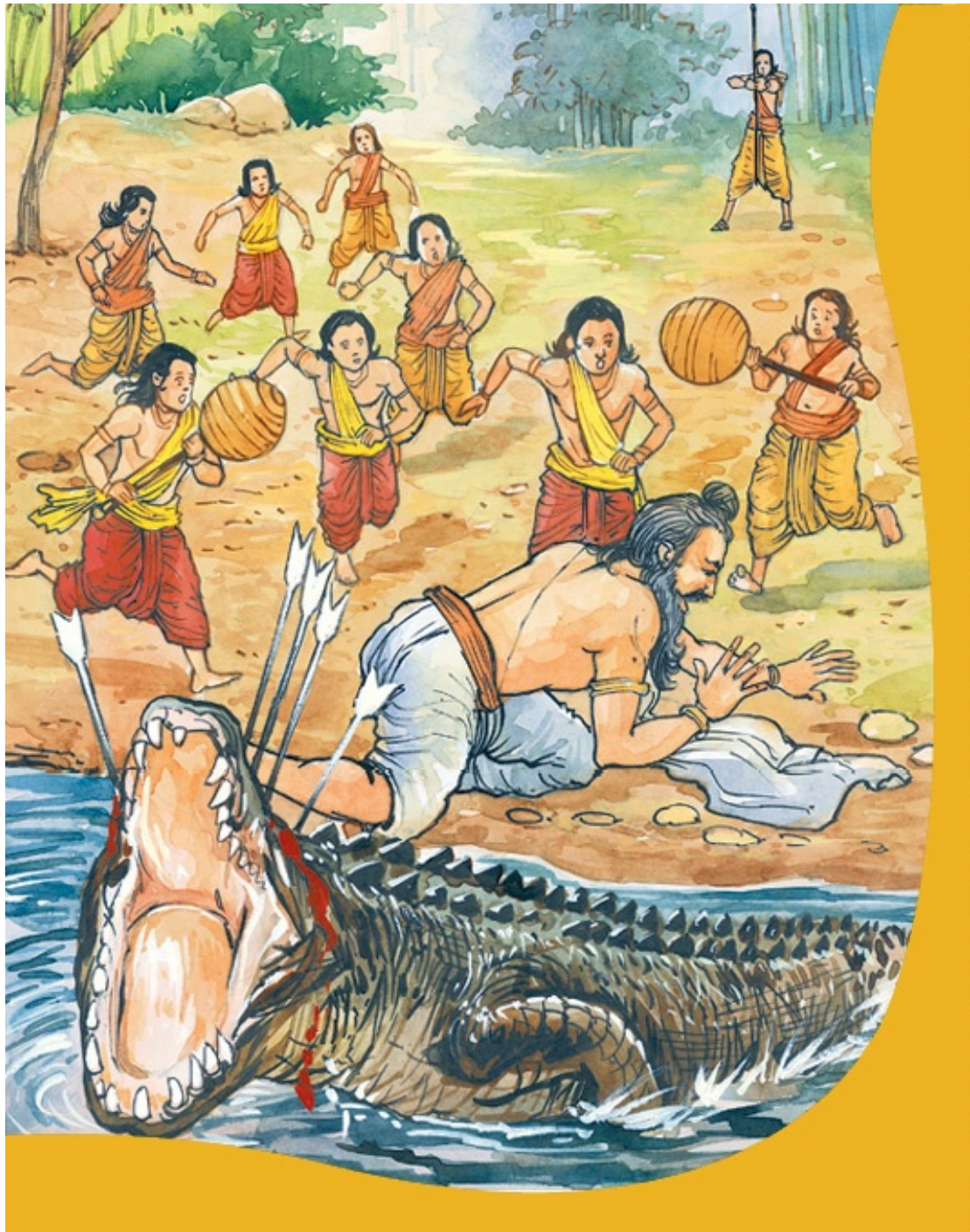
“Gurudev!” Yudhishtir shouted. All the boys were yelling now, jumping up and down and waving their arms. But it was too late.

The crocodile lunged and caught Drona’s foot. The water turned red as Drona screamed.

The Kauravas ran away, terrified, leaving the Pandavas alone with Drona.

Bheem was about to dive into the water when Yudhishtir caught him, holding him back. “I’ll get help!” Yudhishtir said, running for the guards, taking Bheem with him. Nakul and Sahadev rushed after them.

Arjun stayed with Drona. He ran to where he’d set his bow and arrows and brought them to the riverbank. He took aim, breathing deep to calm himself. *Focus*, he told himself. *Stay calm*. He didn’t want to hit Guru Drona.



He shot. His arrow pierced the back of the crocodile's head. He shot again and again, hitting the crocodile wherever he could reach, until it wasn't moving anymore.

Drona was underwater, having fallen in the struggle, and Arjun splashed his way to him.

Drona's head broke the surface and Arjun helped pull his blood-covered leg from the crocodile's mouth.

Arjun shifted to rest Drona's arm around his shoulders but Drona stood by himself. "Gurudev," Arjun said, "we must tend to your wounds!"

"I have no wounds," Drona said.

Arjun wondered if the ordeal had addled his guru's wits. "Your leg," he said.

"My leg is fine. See?" Drona held his leg out.

Arjun glanced at it. The white cotton covering Drona's limb was soaked in red but that was washing away in the river, leaving only white cotton behind. Drona's leg wasn't bleeding, he stood tall and unhurt in the water.

Arjun blinked. He waded to the crocodile that was half sunk in the water and pulled its head up. Its teeth were broken, its mouth containing crushed red berries. Their juice seemed like blood.

The crocodile was cold, stiff, clearly dead for many hours. Arjun stared at it in confusion.

"It was a test," Drona said.

Arjun looked up.

"A test to gauge your reactions in a crisis. We can learn a lot about a person's character by seeing how they react to danger." Drona gestured to the crocodile's body. "I came upon it last night as it breathed its last. The creature lived a long life, ruling the river, and I was able to honor its passing by making good use of its body."

"You wanted me to shoot it?"

"I wanted to see what you would do. What all of you would do. This life is full of crises, Arjun. Crises and disasters and unexpected events. You cannot afford to be unprepared. As princes, the fate of others depends on your ability to know what to do."

The tree branches rustled as Yudhishtir and the younger Pandavas came crashing through them. "We brought help!" Yudhishtir cried as three guards followed him, brandishing swords and looking determined.

However, Yudhishtir caught sight of Drona's easy posture and stopped. He studied Drona's leg and then the crushed red berries in the crocodile's mouth.

His gaze sharpened. "You're unhurt, Gurudev?"

"Precisely right, Yudhishtir. And I congratulate you on stopping Bheem and going for help. You did the right thing."

Yudhishtir was examining the arrows Arjun had used on the crocodile. He smiled. "I think congratulations must go to Arjun."

Bheem stepped into the water and lifted the crocodile's head up to see. He set it down and clapped Arjun on the back. "Well done!" The twins echoed him.

The trees rustled again as Duryodhan and the younger Kauravas walked through them. "We went to get help, Gurudev," Duryodhan said, even though they brought no guards or weapons. "Then I thought we would rescue you ourselves."

Drona cleared his throat. "As you can see, Prince, I've already been rescued. First by Arjun and then by Yudhishtir. But your intention is well noted."

Bheem snickered openly. Duryodhan glared at him and the other Pandavas.

Later that day, Arjun sat with Drona as the boys played. Ashwatthama was not with them.

"Why did you test us today, Gurudev?" Arjun asked, his face pensive as he drew patterns in the earth. "I was lucky to be able to hit the crocodile at all, and that was only because it was dead already." He thought of Bheem about to dive into the water, and how the Kauravas had run away. "The others were not ready for such a threat either. Why did you test us now?"

"Why not?" Drona said. "Do you think disasters will wait until you're ready for them? Life doesn't wait, Arjun. As your guru, it's my dharma to teach you all how to be prepared for a crisis. Any crisis at all, at any time. Only then will you be princes worthy of ruling. Only then will you serve dharma."

Arjun felt the earth beneath his fingertips, felt its fine texture slide under his hand. "I've felt grief before," Arjun said, thinking of his father. "And worry," he said, thinking of when Bheem went missing. "But never have I been so afraid." He ran his dirty hand through his hair.

"It is exactly that fear you must prepare for," Drona told him. "Fear is a powerful emotion. It can turn a man from his family, his people, his dharma."

It can make him a coward. You and your brothers, Arjun, are warriors and warriors cannot be cowards. Conquer this fear and then no matter what happens in life, you will never turn from the path of dharma. That is what my guru, Parashuram, taught me and that is what I'm teaching you."



20. Karn

Guru Parashuram was sitting under a tree, instructing his disciple, Karn, in the nature of men.

“Power corrupts men, Karn,” Parashuram said. “And those men who wield weapons are most easily corrupted, because they hold the power of life and death in their hands. That’s why I’ve been forced twenty-one times to rid the world of cruel warriors, and why I asked you what lineage you were when you first came to me.”

Karn remembered well the day he’d come to Parashuram for his education. It had been several years ago and it was the day he’d lied for the first time in his life. He’d told Parashuram that he was a Pundit so that Parashuram would accept him as a disciple. But the truth was that Karn didn’t know what his lineage was. His adoptive parents in Hastinapur, Adhirath and Radha, were laborers. They had found him floating on a basket in the river. They’d taken him in and raised him. His real parents must not have wanted him, even though he’d been born with earrings and divine armor that grew with his body.

“I vowed never to train a warrior in the martial arts, Bheeshma being an exception because he is *Devi Ganga’s* son,” Parashuram said. “As my disciple,

it will be your duty to protect society from corrupt men. That is why I'm bestowing my knowledge upon you, Karn." He reached out and put his hand on Karn's young shoulder, thickly muscled from intense training. "It is a solemn duty, not to be undertaken lightly. Society looks to us Pundits for guidance."

Karn nodded in obedience while inside, his stomach was knotting. He didn't like when his guru spoke of such things because it reminded Karn of his lie. He wanted to tell his guru the truth but he was afraid that Parashuram wouldn't understand. Karn had already been rejected once before because of his unknown lineage, by Drona, who'd said that he only taught princes. That was why Karn had come to Parashuram, Drona's guru.

It wasn't fair, Karn thought. A person's character was supposed to be based on their actions, not on their father. Why shouldn't Karn get an education, just because he didn't know who his parents were?

Parashuram was still speaking. "For peace to prevail on earth," he said, "tyranny and reckless violence must be stopped immediately by the learned men. That way, the people will not be oppressed by their rulers."

Karn nodded again. He could follow his guru's instructions. He didn't need to be a Pundit to do so.

"For a Pundit to act wisely, he must give up all greed. His motivations must be pure and charitable. Act without greed, Karn, and you shall never be corrupted."

I'm not greedy. I'm charitable, Karn thought defensively. His lie wasn't so bad a price to pay for his training. He was a man now, his education complete. In just a few days he would return home to his adoptive parents and he would follow his guru's teachings.

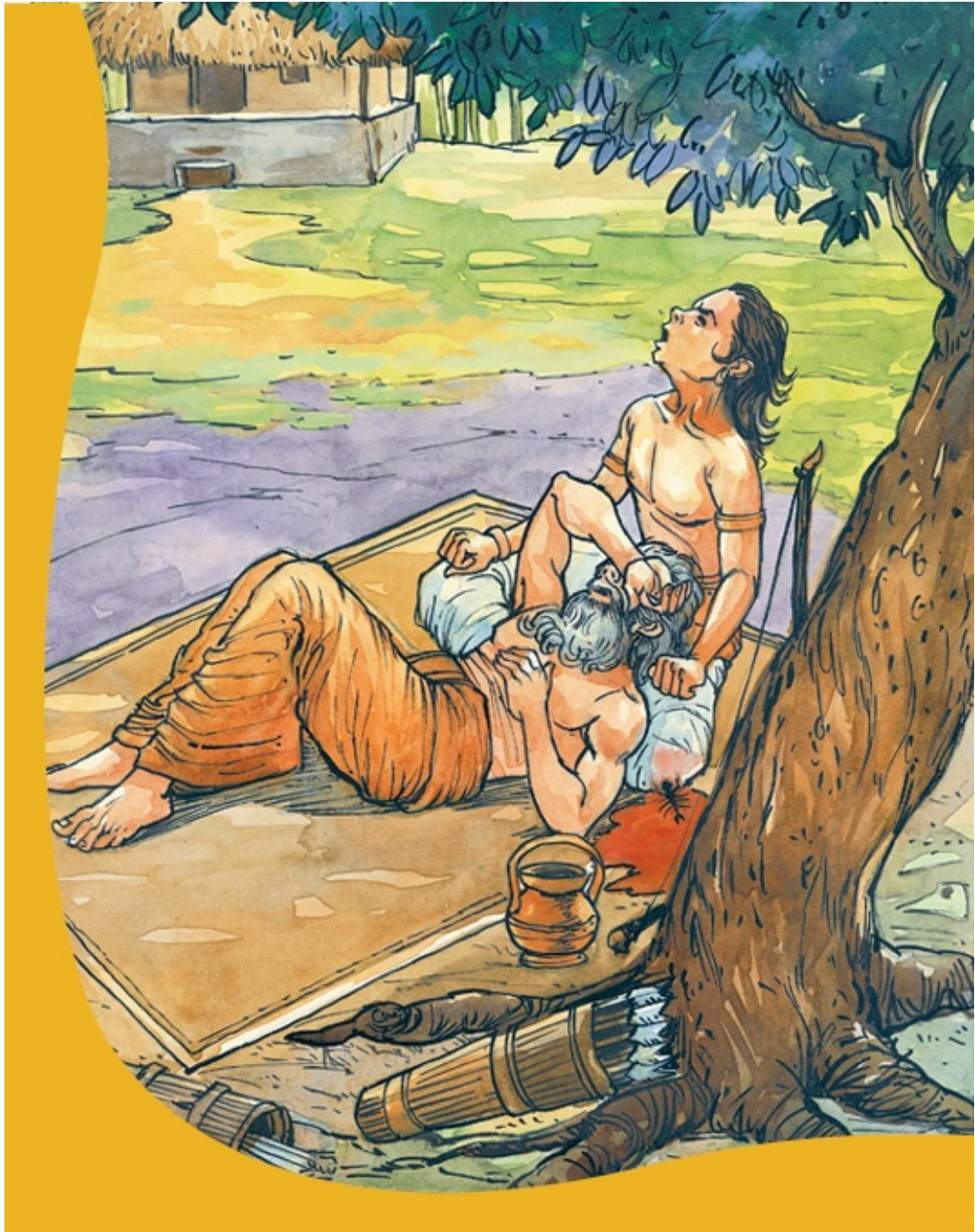
Parashuram and his disciple went for a walk in the forest, hiking up hidden trails and swimming across raging river currents. They stopped to rest as Parashuram was tired. Karn offered his knee as a place for his guru to lay his head. Parashuram accepted and Karn sat quietly, looking out at the lush green forest, careful not to disturb his guru's sleep.

He was watching a herd of elephants pass by when he felt a sudden sharp pain

in his thigh. It was an insect, huge and black and hairy, biting into Karn's flesh to drink his blood. With each second, the pain grew worse and his thigh felt hot and itchy and aching.

He couldn't move. If he did, then his guru's rest would be disturbed.

The insect increased its sucking and Karn's blood started to seep out of the bite and soak his white cotton dhoti. Karn squeezed his eyes shut and breathed, not moving even an inch.



The insect crawled up near his groin. It bit again. Karn clenched his teeth to silence his groan of pain. There was blood all over his thigh and the insect was forcing poison into his flesh, making Karn want to scream and scratch his skin off.

The blood seeped into Parashuram's hair and he roused, sitting up. "What-?" he saw Karn's blood and the insect and gasped. He smacked it away. "Why didn't you wake me, Karn?" he said, his mouth open in dismay.

"I didn't want to disturb your rest, Gurudev," Karn said.

Parashuram was looking at the bites. "You endured all this pain without a word to me?" He rose to his feet, his eyes turning red. "You've lied to me!"

"Lied?" Karn asked, rising. The pain of his bites made him stagger but he faced his guru. "I haven't lied, Gurudev."

"You have! You said you were a Pundit but a Pundit would never have endured such pain. You're a warrior!"

Despite the hot poison in his leg, Karn felt himself going cold. "A warrior? No-"

"You are! They're the only ones who can endure such things."

Karn shook his hands. "No, Gurudev. I'm not. I'm the son of a laborer, a charioteer named Adhirath. I'm not a warrior."

"I don't care who your father is!" Parashuram roared. "Your nature is warrior! You have lied to me and proven the seed of corruption within you!"

Karn fell to his knees, reaching to clasp Parashuram's feet. "Gurudev, please forgive me. I never meant to act dishonorably-"

"BUT YOU DID!" Parashuram shoved Karn's hands away. "You have lied to get knowledge from me. You are greedy and arrogant. I should kill you and protect the world from your base nature but you're my disciple. A guru cannot kill his own student. Therefore, I curse you instead, Karn."

"Gurudev, no, please-"

"In the moment when you need it most, you will forget everything I have taught you," Parashuram said. "This is your guru's curse and it will follow you everywhere." Parashuram gave Karn one last glare, then turned and walked away.

Karn sat in shock. The insect bites made him dizzy and nauseous but he didn't move. He was abandoned, for the second time in his life.

He wandered the land alone for months until he finally went home to Adhirath and Radha in Hastinapur. Adhirath told him that the princes were graduating from school that day. They were in the arena, giving the people a

demonstration of their fighting skills as taught by Drona.

He hadn't been good enough for Drona, Karn thought, bitterly. And now he was cursed by Parashuram but Karn had proven himself with his guru, had he not? He'd mastered all the techniques Parashuram had taught Drona and Bheeshma. Why should he sit like a meek laborer and let Drona's students think they were better than he was? Why should he always be left behind? Before Karn thought any further, he grabbed his bow and arrows and headed to the arena.

The crowd there was vast, cheering the princes from the stands. The entire royal family was also there, from the grandsire, Bheeshma, to the queens, Gandhari and Kunti.

Karn saw Drona's disciples displaying their knowledge of swords, spears, maces, archery, horse-riding, chariot-riding, and so on.

Yudhishthir was best with the spear, defeating all opponents even when they attacked him simultaneously. Bheem and Duryodhan were best with mace-fighting, tackling each other with unerring skill. Nakul and Sahadev were best with swords and on horseback, making the crowd wild with their expertise. And Arjun, he was the best with bow and arrow. Whether on chariot, horseback, or on the ground, he was unbeatable. Using the divine mantras Drona had taught him, Arjun made rain, wind, ice, and fire.

Karn knew the same mantras. He was just as skilled in such feats. He could beat Arjun. He could beat all of them, he thought, clenching his bow.

Drona stood and announced to all of Hastinapur that Arjun was the greatest archer in the world.

"You are wrong!" Karn shouted.

The cheering crowd fell silent. The royal elders on the dais turned to him. Karn felt the heat of the sun as he walked out into the arena. "Arjun is not the best archer. I challenge him to a duel!" he roared, holding his bow up to the sky.

अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च ।
निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥
सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः ।
मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥

*advēṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṁ maitraḥ karuṇa eva cha
nirmamo nirahankāraḥ sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣhamī
santuṣṭaḥ satataṁ yogī yatātmā dṛḍha-niśchayaḥ
mayy arpita-mano-buddhir yo mad-bhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ*

Those devotees are very dear to me who are free from malice toward all living beings, who are friendly, and compassionate. They are free from attachment to possessions and egotism, equipoised in happiness and distress, and ever-forgiving. They are ever-contented, steadily united with me in devotion, self-controlled, firm in conviction, and dedicated to me in mind and intellect.

Bhagavad Gita 12.13 - 14



21. Advantage

Kunti was just as startled by the young man's challenge as everyone else. Worried for Arjun, Kunti peered at the stranger and noticed his strange radiant armor that seemed like his own skin. Flashing earrings glittered from his earlobes. Kunti gasped.

It was Karn! Her first baby given by Surya!

In the silence, Arjun stepped forward. "I will answer your challenge," he called, flabbergasted that this nameless person should try to embarrass Guru Drona this way.

"Quiet, Arjun," Drona said.

Arjun bowed his head. "Forgive me, Gurudev."

The family priest of the Bharat clan, Kripacharya, rose from his seat beside the king. "Young man," he called down to Karn, "challenges can only be made between equals otherwise the match is not lawful or honorable. So let me introduce you to who you have challenged. This is Prince Arjun of the Bharat clan. His father was King Pandu and his mother is Queen Kunti and he is a disciple of Guru Drona. Now name your own lineage."

Karn opened his mouth but nothing came out. He couldn't name his mother

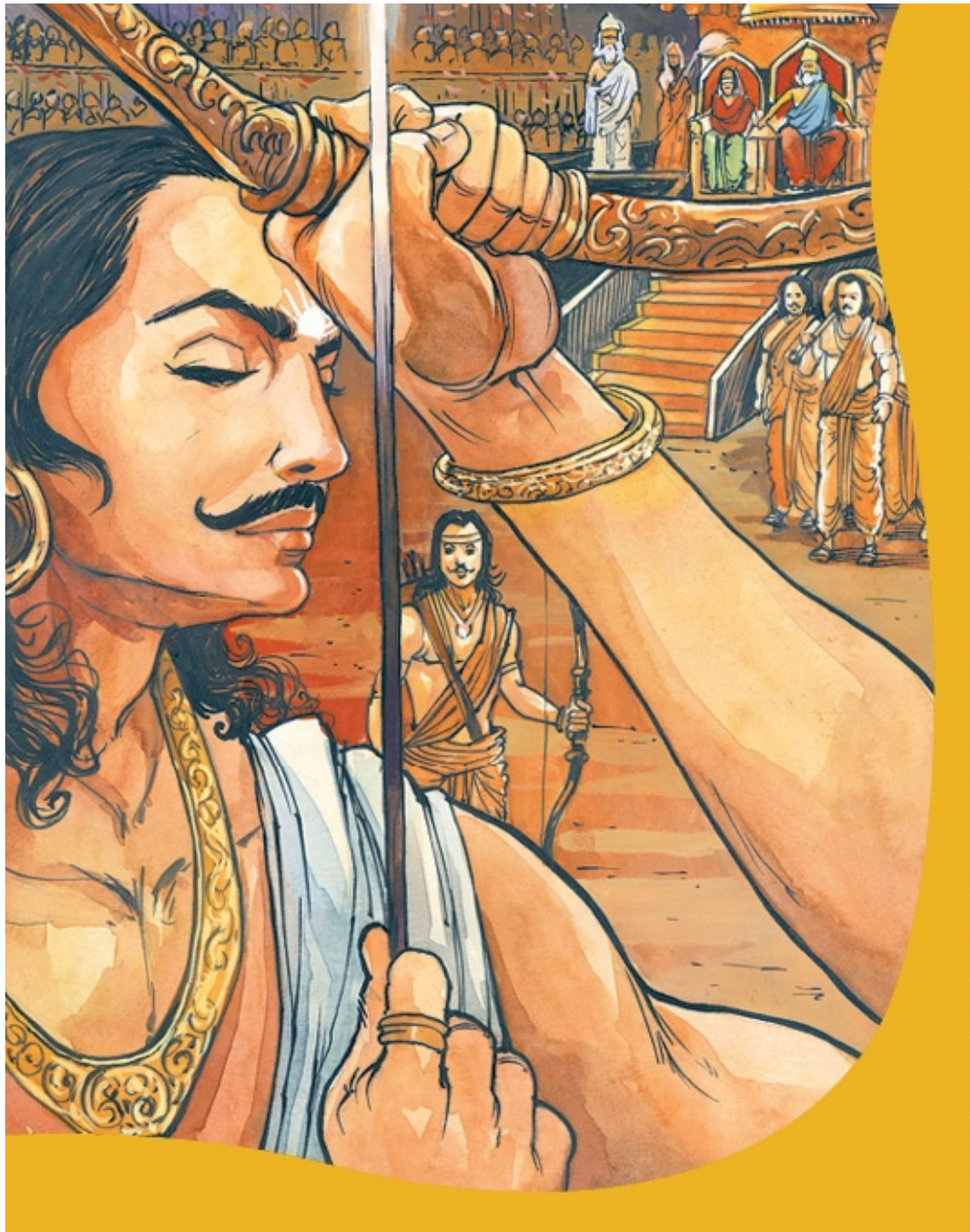
or his father. His laborer adoptive parents could never be equal to the Bharat clan. He couldn't even say that he was Sage Parashuram's disciple, because Parashuram had abandoned him.

He lowered his head and the crowd watched his silent shame.

Kunti felt Karn's shame as her own and her body burned. Karn was her son and he didn't know it! Kunti was dizzy. She tried to rise, to speak for her son and stop this but the blood rushed from her head. Her vision went blurry. "He-he's my..."

She fainted in her chair. In the commotion, no one noticed.

"My son!" yelled a male voice. Everyone turned to the speaker and it was Adhirath, the king's retired charioteer, who was running across the sands of the arena to where Karn stood before the dais.



Karn turned to him. "Father."

Sitting in the princes' box with the other Pandavas, Bheem heard. "A charioteer's son?" he said loudly, his voice incredulous. "A laborer challenges Arjun?" Appalled that Arjun had come so close to a dishonorable fight, Bheem rose. "Come away, Arjun. Such an unequal duel is not worthy of you."

Karn flushed.

Adhirath reached him. "Karn, what are you doing here?" he asked in dismay.

"Father, I—"

"Wait!" It was Duryodhan who spoke, the king's eldest son. "It's clear from this Karn's form and demeanor that he's been trained in the martial arts. Why should his father matter?"

"Honorable warriors do not brawl in the streets." Kripacharya said. "They fight with equals so that no one is at a disadvantage."

"If it's so important that they be equals then I'll make him one!" Duryodhan said. "My father gave me the territory of Anga. I'll make Karn its king!"

Before anyone could react, Duryodhan jumped down from the princes' box and put a red *tilak* on Karn's forehead. "I declare you King of Anga!"

Karn was in shock. He simply stood there, holding his bow, staring at Duryodhan. His guru had told him that the warriors' power corrupted them. He'd never said that they were so generous.

All his life, Karn had been turned away because he didn't know who he was. But Duryodhan didn't care about that. He was, regardless of Karn's lineage, giving Karn land, wealth, even a kingship! Karn kneeled before Duryodhan. "I swear my loyalty and undying friendship to you, from this moment until my death."

Kunti came to her senses, wondering where she was. She was in her seat at the arena and her sons had been demonstrating their skills. Arjun had been demonstrating. Then Karn had arrived... Kunti jerked to her feet. In panic, she parted her lips to speak, to reveal to all that Karn was her son.

"Karn, King of Anga, will you fight my enemies with me?" Duryodhan asked, his voice carrying to all corners of the arena.

Kunti froze.

"I will always fight your enemies, Prince Duryodhan," Karn vowed. "My life is yours."

Kunti listened in horror. What was happening? Duryodhan and her son Karn were friends? Karn was now king of Anga? He was pledging loyalty to

Duryodhan?

“Good.” Duryodhan raised Karn and they embraced. “Now you may fight Arjun as an equal.”

Kunti was silently screaming. She clutched her face with her hands.

“No, you may not,” Kripacharya interjected. “This is an arena, not a battlefield. Duels may not be held here.”

Thank you, Guru Kripa! Kunti thought. She tried to breathe, sucking in air like she’d run for miles.

Duryodhan shrugged. “We’ll save this fight for another day, my friend,” he said. “Leave now and later, you and I will go to see the kingdom I’ve given you. You will assume your power there.”

This was why Karn was king of Anga, Kunti realized. He was now in Duryodhan’s debt. He’d vowed to kill Duryodhan’s enemies but Duryodhan’s enemies were her own sons!

Karn was reluctant to leave the arena but he didn’t want to upset his new friend and patron. Karn and Adhirath left while Duryodhan returned to the princes’ box.

He was surrounded by the Kauravas. “Why did you do that?” Dushasan whispered. “He’s just a charioteer’s son.”

“I know,” Duryodhan’s voice was low. “But think about it. Anyone brave or stupid enough to challenge Arjun is worth befriending. He’ll kill Arjun for us and then the other Pandavas will be easy to destroy.”

“Ohhh...” his brothers murmured in understanding.

Kunti watched Karn walk out of the arena gate with Adhirath and collapsed onto her seat, weak and shaking. Karn had been with Adhirath this whole time! He’d been raised as a laborer. Kunti clasped her trembling hands, thankful for Adhirath’s kindness in raising her baby.

Kunti heard her sons console Arjun as he joined them on their side of the princes’ box. They said it was a shame that he’d not been able to silence the outsider once and for all but Guru Kripa had been right to stop an unequal

duel.

Outsider. They called Karn an outsider when in truth he was their eldest brother.

“Oh Krishna,” Kunti said, covering her face with her sari so no one could see her tears. “Krishna, what do I do?”



22. Many Gates

Far away in Sage Sandipani's *ashram*, Balaram walked up to Krishna who was leaning against a *tamal* tree. Krishna's dark skin matched the tree trunk and yet the light radiating from within set him apart. "What are you thinking about?" Balaram asked.

"Our aunt," Krishna said.

Balaram thought Krishna was talking about one of their relatives in Mathura. "You will see everyone soon enough when we return home tomorrow. But pay attention now because Gurudev has a guest he wants us all to meet."

Sage Parashuram had come to the *ashram*. Guru Sandipani instructed all his students to line up before his mud and straw hut and bow before Parashuram.

Parashuram, his silver beard falling to his slim waist like a waterfall, walked before the students. His face stern, he stopped in front of Krishna. "Why do you bow, son of Devaki?"

Krishna was staring at the dusty ground. "Because you are Sage Parashuram."

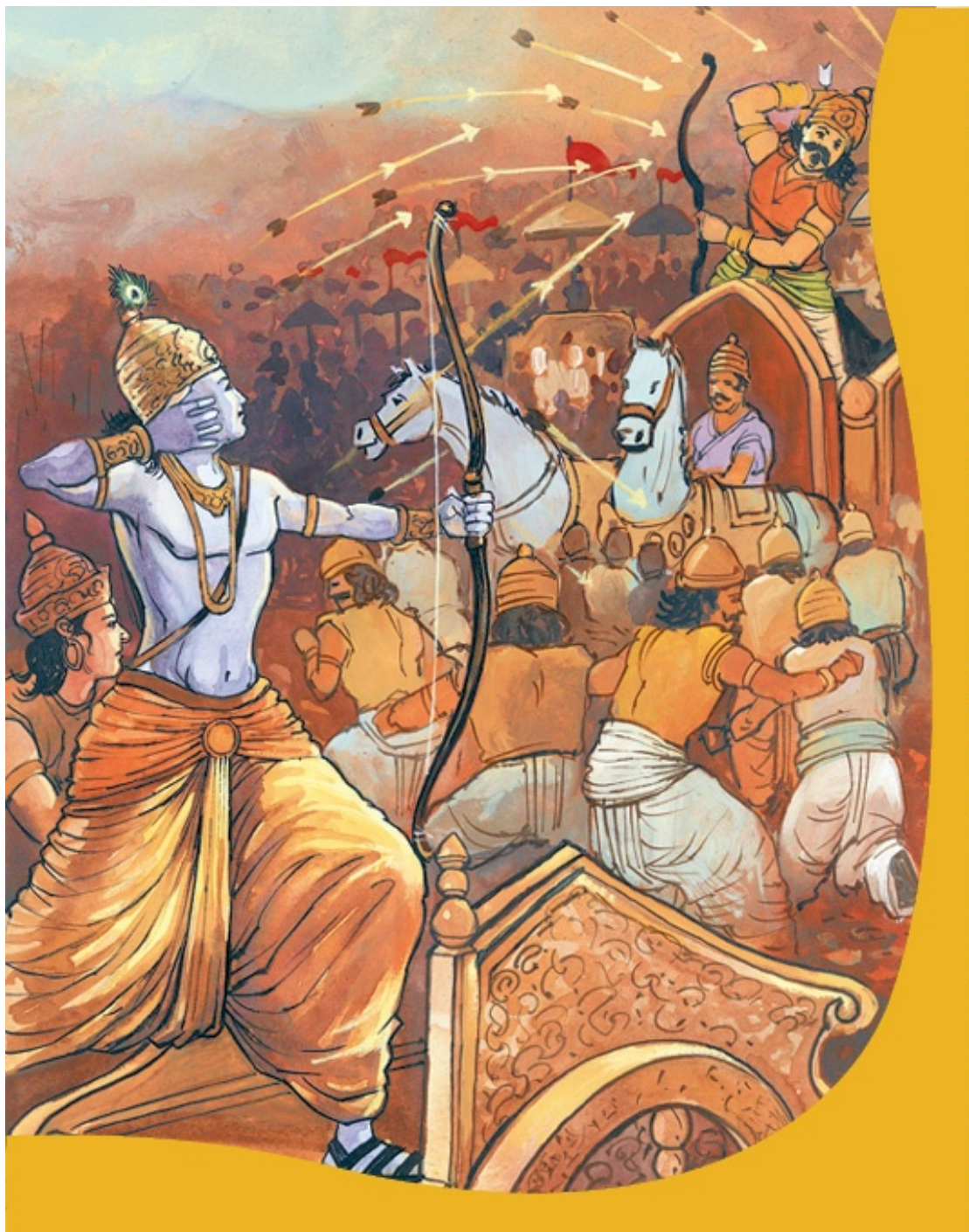
Parashuram smiled, his silver hair glinting in the sunlight. "And you are the savior. Arise, for I have something to give you," Krishna obeyed and Parashuram raised his hand. There was a sudden flash and a golden discus

now spun around Parashuram's forefinger.

"The *sudarshan chakra*," Sandipani whispered, recognizing the divine weapon as Vishnu's own.

"I have kept it all these years, Krishna," Parashuram said, "waiting for the day I would give it to you. Come and take what is yours."

Krishna lifted his hand. The divine discus slipped from Parashuram's hold to Krishna's, like a child leaving one parent and going to another. It hummed in satisfaction as it seated itself upon Krishna's hand.



“For many generations, I have protected this world from the corruption of warriors,” Parashuram said. “Yet the seeds of evil have once more been sown. Lies and greed are rampant in the land and humanity suffers, Krishna! The protection of this world now passes from me to you.”

Krishna bowed again. “Where should I start?”

“Start in your own land. Mathura suffers from the unjust attacks of King Jarasandh, Kansa’s father-in-law. Jarasandh blames you for Kansa’s death,

yet it is your innocent city that suffers.” Parashuram granted blessings to all and left the *ashram*.

Sage Sandipani gave Krishna and Balaram permission to return immediately to Mathura. They arrived on the outskirts of the city just as Mathura’s army was on the brink of defeat against King Jarasandh of Magadh.

They tore onto the battlefield like lions on jackals. With one blow of his mace, Balaram laid waste to squadrons, while Krishna’s *chakra* decimated legions. Jarasandh retreated in haste.

Krishna and Balaram returned to the palace and Mathura welcomed them with joy. However, Jarasandh had attacked many times and his forces were vast. It was only a matter of time until he broke through Mathura’s defenses again.

Krishna went to Ugrasen’s court. “I have a proposal for the defense of the city,” he announced.

The courtiers hushed, eager to hear what their beloved savior would say.

“Our motherland is sacred to us,” Krishna said. “Yet she bleeds and will continue to do so if we do not save her from this tyrant, Jarasandh. Therefore, I propose that the Yadu clan move from Mathura to a new place, one that is easily defended.”

A stunned silence followed. Then:

“What?” Balaram shouted. He was looking aghast at his little brother. “You would have us leave our own home?”

“To save her, yes.”

“And let Jarasandh win? You want us to turn tail and run?” Balaram was purple-faced, the veins in his temples engorged and throbbing. “We have won every war and we will continue to win.”

Krishna frowned. “Jarasandh is different. The source of his power comes from his unusual birth and it will take more than brute force to destroy him.”

“We’ll still fight!” The entire court was standing, fists clenched.

Krishna took a deep breath. “I killed the tyrant, Kansa. I used violence and

look at the result - only more violence.”

“We’ll never leave Mathura!” they shouted. “We’ll die first!”

“You are dying!” Krishna cried. Startled, the court hushed again. Krishna stepped closer to the throne. “How many thousands of men have we lost so far? How many women are widowed and children orphaned? How much more will we lose before Jarasandh is satisfied?” Krishna threw up his hands. “He attacks you just to get to me.”

“You’re our savior,” Akrur said. “We’ll die to defend you.”

“But I want you to live,” Krishna said, “and if we move from here then Jarasandh will have no reason to attack this land.”

“But how can you run away?” his father, Vasudev, asked him.

“The world will call you Ranchod, one who runs from battle,” Akrur said.

“Is my name more important than my motherland?” Krishna said. “Is my pride worth more than the lives of my people?” He shook his head. “I am known by many names. Throughout time, I will be known by many more names. If I’m called with love then I will always answer, even if I’m called Ranchod.”

The entire court was mesmerized. King Ugrasen was shaking his head, marveling.

“There is more than one way to deal with an enemy,” Krishna said. “We love Mathura too much to let her be overrun by evil,” Krishna insisted. “If I allow that, simply to avoid a name...where is my honor then?”

A long silence followed.

Ugrasen said: “I am willing to agree with you, Prince Krishna. But the first question is where would we go? Our clan is vast. Where would we find a city to support our numbers?”

Krishna clasped his hands. “I have already considered this question, Your Majesty.” He looked upwards. “Lord Vishwakarma, please grace this court.”

There was a flash of light and then a radiant celestial was standing on the dais steps. He was fair-skinned and brown-haired, with golden eyes that threw

sparks. The court gasped to behold him.



“Architect of the *devatas*,” Krishna said, “what are your thoughts on the matter of a new city for the Yadu clan?”

“I have a design for an island in the ocean.” Vishwakarma’s voice was slow and melodious. “These are the plans.” A model city built in clay appeared at Ugrasen’s feet, complete in miniature detail.

The royal family stood to examine it. Courtiers crowded around to see.

Large palaces studded with gems were dotted around the island. Parks and gardens were everywhere. There were fountains, paved streets, designated marketplaces, and civic buildings. Temples also bedecked the city, complete with miniature flags and flowers in stunning detail.

“This is where the royal family will live,” Vishwakarma said, pointing out carved and jeweled quarters. “And the court buildings would be housed here in the east. These structures would be barracks for guards,” he pointed to towers around the city. “These eleven gates would be the main entrances and the men to protect them will be housed here and here. These fields would provide sustenance for the city so it need not rely on imported food supplies. The sewer system and irrigation would run through these waterways,” he added, pointing to lines that ran under the buildings. “All roads will ultimately lead to the court. With the ocean on all sides, successful attack will be difficult unless the attack comes from the sky.”

The people were looking at the model in wonder, awed by its beauty and grace.

“When can it be built?” Ugrasen asked.

“It is already built,” Vishwakarma said.

“Already built!” the people exclaimed, looking at each other in amazement.

“I immediately began work the moment Shri Krishna expressed interest in such a city. I only await permission to raise it from beneath the sea.”

“Beneath the sea!” the entire court was wide-eyed.

“It will be raised by the time your people arrive there. I will have boats waiting to transfer you from the coast.” Vishwakarma looked at Krishna. “I have named this city Dwaraka, the city of gates. What say you, Lord?”

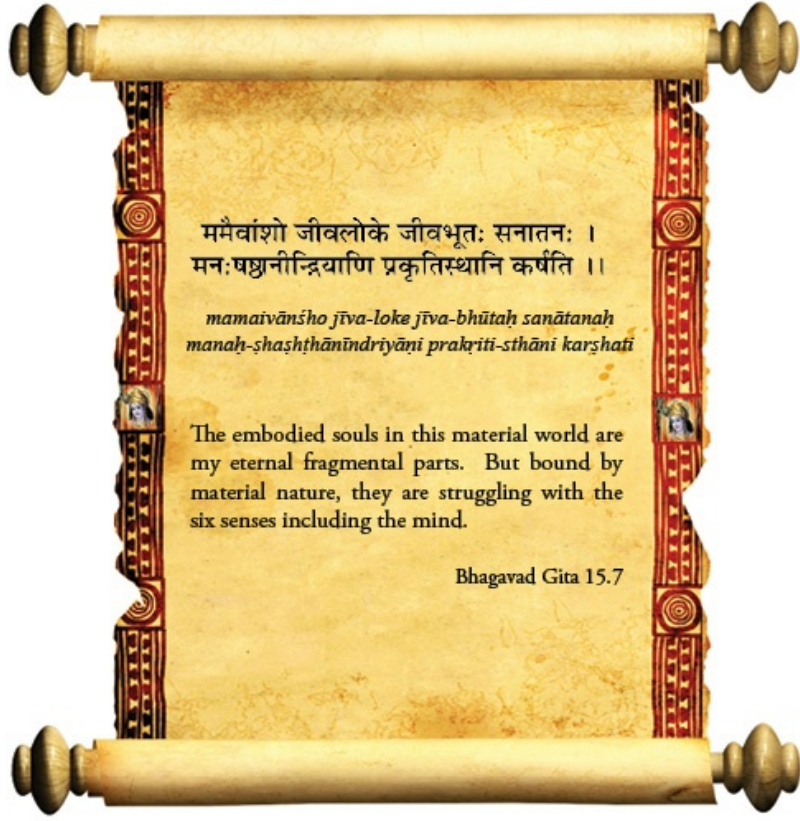
Krishna looked at King Ugrasen. “Your Majesty?”

The people listened with baited breath, barely able to believe this was happening.

Ugrasen studied the model again. “I say,” he said slowly, “that our people must prepare to leave for Dwaraka.”

There was a collective intake of breath. Then, as one, everyone turned to Krishna. "Glory to Lord Ranchod! Glory to Lord Ranchod!" they chanted.

Krishna bowed humbly before them. Soon his people would be safe and Mathura wiped clean of blood. He smiled.



ममैवांशो जीवलोके जीवभूतः सनातनः ।
मनःषष्ठानीन्द्रियाणि प्रकृतिस्थानि कर्षति ॥

*mamaivānśho jīva-loke jīva-bhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ
manaḥ-ṣhaṣṭhānīndriyāṇi prakṛiti-sthāni karṣhati*

The embodied souls in this material world are
my eternal fragmental parts. But bound by
material nature, they are struggling with the
six senses including the mind.

Bhagavad Gita 15.7



23. True Love

Rukmini, the Princess of Vidarbha, was famous throughout Bharat for her beauty and charm. With the exception of Draupadi, the Princess of Panchal, there was no one to rival her in grace and talents and gentle character. She was, herself, a manifestation of Radha.

A Pundit named Sunand came as a messenger to visit her father, King Bheeshmak. Rukmini met him one day as she sat in the garden with her friends and Sunand told her about Dwaraka, where he was from. He said that Dwaraka was a golden city, a magical land that had risen from the sea. And its crowning jewel was Krishna, the darling of the Yadus, who had saved his people from so much pain and bloodshed.

Rukmini was amazed to hear of such a fantastical place with such a hero.

“He is the savior,” Sunand said. “He is the Supreme Lord who has come to destroy tyrants and bring love to all.”

“What tyrants? What love?” Rukmini asked, never having heard the history of Mathura.

Sunand revealed to her the prophecy that predicted Krishna’s birth. He spoke of how Krishna had defeated numerous warriors and *rakshasas* and even

devatas, all to protect the devotees and serve the sages.

With each story, Rukmini became more and more enchanted. She thought of Krishna all day and dreamed of him all night. She couldn't eat. All she wanted was to be with Krishna.

Many offers came for her hand in marriage from kings and princes all over the land. Her father, Bheeshmak, discussed the different offers with her brothers, Rukmi and Rukman. "This offer interests me," Bheeshmak said, looking at a letter from the powerful King Jarasandh. "Jarasandh says that his protégé, Prince Shishupal of Chedi, is a good match for our daughter."

"I like that proposal too," Rukmi said. "By allying with Magadh and Chedi we will secure much power for Vidarbh."

Rukman, the younger brother, was frowning. "Both Jarasandh and Shishupal are enemies with Krishna of Dwaraka, Father."

"So?" Rukmi said. "We have no friendship with Dwaraka."

"Maybe we should," Rukman suggested. "It's said that Krishna has no equal, that he is Vishnu himself. Surely he must be the only match for our Rukmini, who is an incarnation of Lakshmi?"

"Rukman!" his elder brother snapped. "What are you thinking? To marry our Rukmini off to that cowherd Krishna? He is a Ranchod!"

"Shishupal is a better choice," Rukmi said. "He has ridden into war with Jarasandh many times and is rich from all their conquests. His family is ancient, his bloodline pure."

"You do realize that Shishupal and Krishna are cousins?" Rukman said. "Shishupal is the son of Vasudev's sister Shrutadev. Their bloodline is the same."

Rukmi scoffed. "Krishna's a nobody who calls himself Devaki and Vasudev's son. My sister will marry Shishupal."

Bheeshmak agreed with him and it was decided. Rukmi gave Rukmini the good news.

She gazed in horror at her eldest brother but he didn't even notice her

expression. “We’ve sent out invitations and the engagement gifts,” he told her before leaving. “Shishupal will arrive in just a few weeks to marry you.” Her maids were full of excitement, giggling and talking. Rukmini couldn’t bear it. She sent them away and sat alone.

How could her father and brother have done this to her? It was her right to choose her own husband. Now she was to marry Shishupal, who fought wars against Krishna? He’d allied with Jarasandh who was as great a tyrant as could exist in the world.

Rukmini went to her desk where her writing utensils were and began to write.

“Invincible Krishna, Lord of the World,

“When I heard the stories of your life, they entered my heart and filled my mind and my soul became your devotee. I know now that the only reason I have eyes is so that one day, I might look upon you. This is why I write to say that I choose you for my husband.

“You are the world’s happiness. You are the sages’ peace. Lotus-Eyed Krishna, I am yours but my father and brother have arranged my marriage to Shishupal! If I have followed the path of dharma then come to me, Oh Krishna. Rescue me from Shishupal and prove your valor before the world.

“I know you will not want to hurt innocent people in a war. Therefore, on the day before my marriage, I will go to the temple of Mother Gauri outside the city gates. I will wait for you there, Lord of my Heart. If you do not come to me then my life will be empty. Perhaps in my next life, or the next, I will be fortunate enough to gain a place at your feet.

Eternally Yours, Rukmini.”

She sealed her letter and entrusted it to Sunand, who took it all the way to Krishna in Dwaraka.

Krishna broke the seal and read. He sat down hard on the seat behind him. “Is this truly from Princess Rukmini?” he asked. When Sunand nodded, Krishna squeezed his eyes shut. “Sunand, if you only knew how I have loved her since the moment I first heard her name! Her brother hates me but she calls me to her side!”

Krishna bolted to his feet. Within the hour he was armored and on his way.

It was the day before Rukmini's marriage. She dressed in a red silk sari and her bridal jewelry, jasmine flowers adorning her dark hair. She looked in the mirror, wondering if Krishna would come. She took her *puja* tray and went with her maids to the temple but was stopped by Rukmi as she left the palace.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his hand gripping her upper arm.

She trembled. "To Mother Gauri's temple to offer prayers. I took permission from Father."

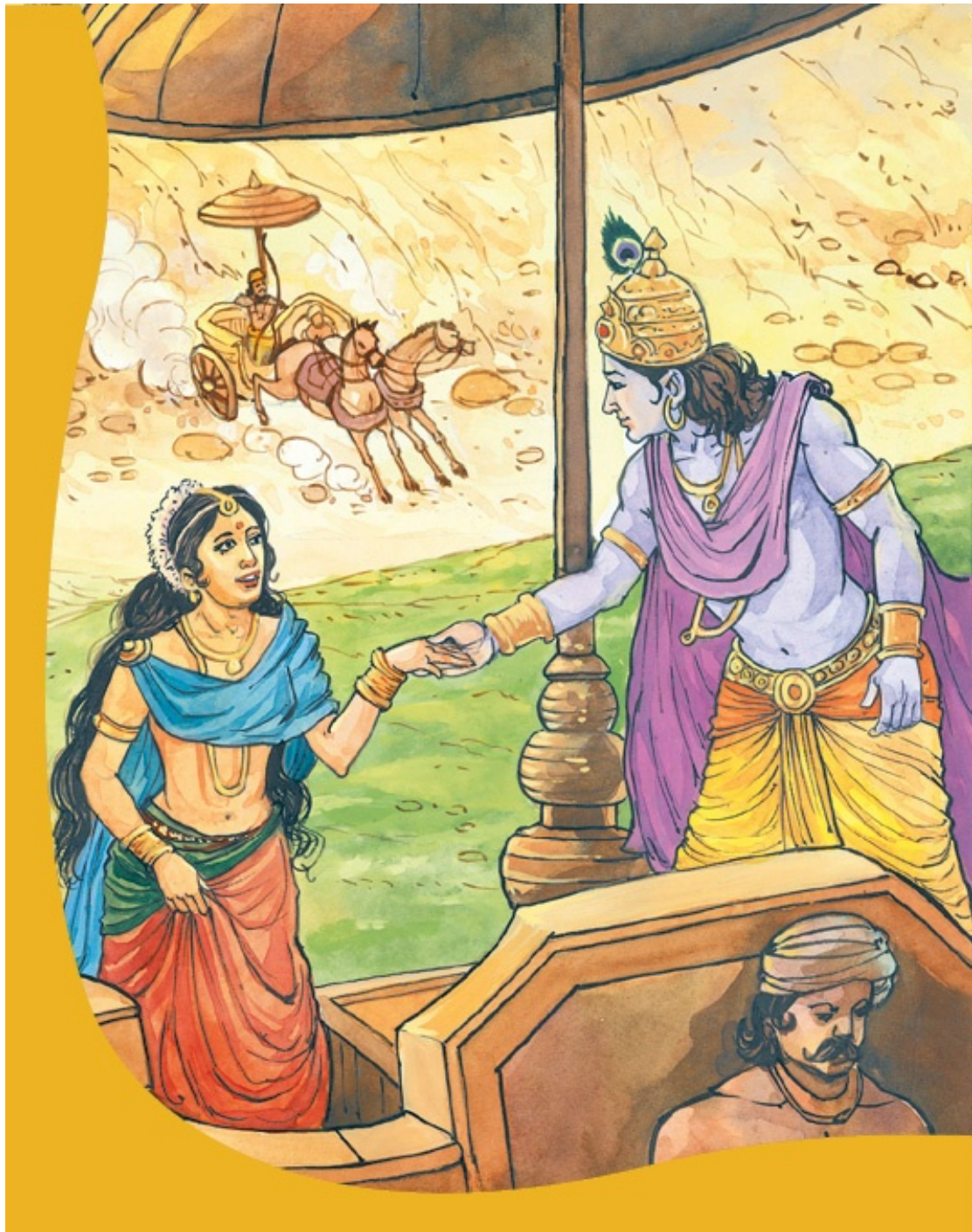
Rukmi smiled fondly down at her. "Of course, go." He kissed her forehead.

Rukmini's heart ached. She loved her brother, even though he had done this terrible thing. Wiping away a tear, she left the palace and came to Gauri's sanctuary.

Ascending the steps, she passed the marble pillars and came to the altar. She offered flowers and incense and sweets to the Divine Mother, and sang her praises. Then she sat and waited. *Will he come, Mother?* she asked Gauri.

She waited a long time. Her maids were confused because they didn't know what she was waiting for. Then they felt the ground rumble.

There, in the distance, was a chariot rushing towards her. It approached at such speed that its four cloud-colored horses appeared as a gathering storm. Above them rode the lord of that storm. His black curls flew behind him in the wind, and Rukmini's heart almost stopped when his dark gaze locked on her face. He was so beautiful.



The chariot pulled up before the temple and Rukmini descended the stairs. In silence they stood, the air tingling around them. Krishna held out his hand and she laid her own within it. "My lady," Krishna said, drawing her onto his chariot.

Her maids shrieked but Rukmini never looked back. Her home was with Krishna.

"My lord," she said, "I cannot thank you enough for answering my call."

"I cannot refuse when I'm called with love," Krishna said. "Your letter made me so happy, Princess."

Rukmini thought she would burst with joy.

"Have we your permission to ride home to Dwaraka?" he asked her.

"You need my permission?"

His smile made the sun dull in comparison. "You willed me to come here. We cannot leave until you will us to go."

Rukmini thought about how her father and brother hadn't cared about her will. Yet Krishna was surrounded by enemies and he still cared what she thought. "Let us leave Vidarbha immediately," she told him.

Krishna commanded his charioteer to head for Dwaraka and the horses leaped forward, seeming to fly over the ground. They rode until they were just a short distance from the border when Krishna halted the chariot. He lifted his conch shell to his lips and blew, announcing his presence in Vidarbha.

Rukmini gasped.

He looked at her. "If I don't announce myself then I'll be a coward. I'm not abducting you, Princess, I'm taking you with your permission. We have nothing to fear."

Rukmi heard the conch call as he sat in his chamber, entertaining Shishupala with a dice match. They both leaped to their feet on hearing it. Just then a guard burst into the room. "My Prince, the Princess has been abducted by Krishna! And the army of Dwaraka is at the city gates, led by Balaram!"

"I will go to my sister," Rukmi said to Shishupala. "You go to meet Balaram's army."

Krishna was blasting his way through a blockade at the border when Rukmi showed up on his chariot, charging across the battlefield. Krishna motioned for Rukmini to stay low and she listened, crouching behind him. Rukmi and Krishna engaged in battle but Krishna only defended himself, not attacking until Rukmi became desperate, hurling weapons without considering the danger to his sister. Then Krishna broke Rukmi's bow with a single arrow and threw a rope around him, binding him tight. Krishna paused.

“Well?” Rukmi shouted. “What are you waiting for? Kill me!”

“No,” Rukmini said. “Please, Lord.”

Krishna looked towards her, then back at Rukmi. “I will not kill my own brother-in-law.”

“I’m not your brother-in-law!”

“Yes, you are.” Krishna put his arm around Rukmini, holding her close. “Let us forget our differences and live in peace, Brother. It’s what your sister wishes and her wish is my command.”

Krishna took Rukmini home to Dwaraka where they were married, the Supreme and the Soul forever united.



24. Justice for All

The news reached Hastinapur that Krishna had rescued Princess Rukmini and married her, to the fury of Shishupal and Jarasandh both.

Kunti smiled at the news but it couldn't eclipse her sadness about Karn. Her eldest son had declared enmity on Arjun and all the Pandavas and was always in Duryodhan's company. Kunti could find no way to get near him and even if she could find a way, she was afraid of what Duryodhan might do if he found out the truth. Would Duryodhan kill Karn if he knew Karn was her son?

She didn't know what to do and it broke her mother's heart.

If it were not for this dilemma, Kunti had every reason to be happy. Her sons were engaged in their duties at court and soon Dhritarashtra would announce his heir. Kunti knew that Yudhishtir had grown into a fine man worthy of the throne. Pandu would be proud.

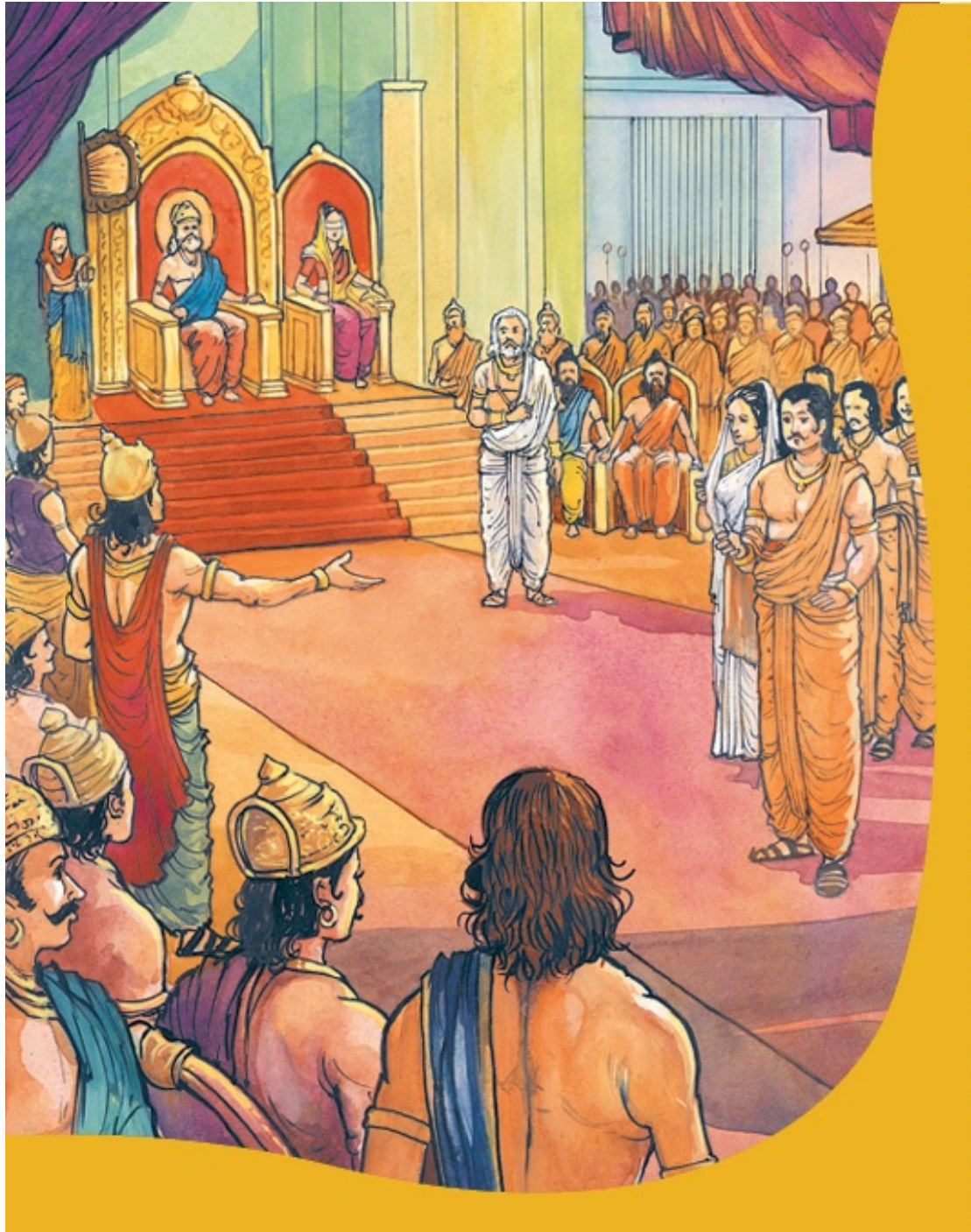
Yudhishtir was hugely popular amongst the people because he was a friend to all. His ideas on improving efficiency in taxation had led to all prospering because he rearranged the system to reduce the burden on craftsmen and farmers. This led to an increase in creative output and as a result, the merchants prospered which meant they could give more in taxes. Yudhishtir also worked closely within the ranks of warriors to inspire loyalty and co-

operation. He went on border patrols and trained beside lowly recruits, asking them about their barracks and commanders, measuring their morale.

The Pundits particularly liked Yudhishtir because he was an intellectual, always curious to learn. He sat in on their debates and research, and followed their philosophical arguments. Yudhishtir asked thoughtful questions, showing a sharpness of mind that they knew would be beneficial for the kingdom.

Bheeshma, Vidur, Kripacharya, and Dronacharya all favored Yudhishtir as heir. Due to Yudhishtir's popularity amongst the people it was impossible that Dhritarashtra might announce any other name even though he wanted his own Duryodhan on the throne.

The day of the announcement came and the court was packed with citizens while thousands gathered outside, waiting to celebrate Yudhishtir's day.



Kunti and Gandhari sat behind the dais with all their sons seated before them. Yudhishthir and Duryodhan sat side by side, next to the king on the throne.

Vidur called for silence.

Dhritarashtra said: "I announce today before all my people, my ancestors, the celestials, the sages, the rivers, the forests, the sky, and the Almighty Lord, that the new heir to Hastinapur shall be—"

“Forgive me, Your Majesty!”

The crowd whipped around to see who had interrupted. It was a lone guard, standing in armored uniform in the open doorway of the court.

Vidur came forward. “What is it?”

The guard bowed, his helmet glinting from the sunlight. “A murder has been committed in the city, Prime Minister. The guilty have confessed and they await the king’s judgment.”

“The king is busy,” Vidur said, “but...” He turned to look at Dhritarashtra. “Such a crime should not wait to be resolved, Your Majesty. The people must have justice.”

Dhritarashtra nodded. “Let the accused be brought forth.”

Four men in chains were brought into the marble court. They were a surprising group. One was in rich silk while another was in rags. Yet another was in armor while the last was in clean white cotton.

“Announce the charges against them,” Dhritarashtra said.

“Murder, Your Majesty,” the guard answered. “These four friends surrounded their victim and beat him to death.”

“A cowardly act,” Dhritarashtra said. “They shall-”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty!” This time it was Vidur who interrupted. “I have a notion that since today you announce the heir, why not let the two eldest princes judge this case? The people can see for themselves what justice they will find in both of them.”

There were calls of agreement from around the court. Dhritarashtra gripped the arms of his throne, his knuckles whitening. “Certainly. Duryodhan, what you do think should be done with these four men?”

Duryodhan rose to his feet and put his hands on his hips. “There is nothing to think about, Your Majesty. A life for a life. All four should be hanged.”

“Glory to Prince Duryodhan! Glory to Prince Duryodhan!” his brothers called, joined by Shakuni and Karn. The chant was taken up by some others around the court but Duryodhan’s swift decision was not cheered by the Pundits or

the elders.

Dhritarashtra gestured to the guard to take the men away.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Vidur said again. “You have not given Yudhishtir a chance to judge.”

Only Vidur, standing close to him, could see Dhritarashtra grind his teeth. “Then let Yudhishtir speak now,” he agreed with Vidur.

Yudhishtir stood, bowing respectfully to the king and elders and sages. He walked closer to the chained men. “Each of you tell me what your occupation is,” he said.

“I am a Pundit,” mumbled the man in white cotton, his expression meek.

“I am a warrior,” announced the one in armor, his stance tall and powerful.

“I am a merchant,” muttered the one in silk, a jewel glittering on his turban.

“I am a laborer,” whispered the man in rags, hanging his head.

Yudhishtir asked more questions. Where did they live? What was their education level? Where did they come from? What was their wealth? Who was the man they’d quarreled with?

Their victim had been a traveler and had disputed with them over only a small matter.

“Hmmm.” Yudhishtir nodded. “I sentence the laborer to four years in prison, the merchant to eight years, and the warrior to sixteen. The Pundit I send to Guru Kripacharya for sentencing.”

Duryodhan gave Yudhishtir an incredulous look. “The crime is one and you give four different sentences?”

“That makes no sense,” Shakuni said.

“That’s not fair!” Dushasan yelled.

“That’s not fair! That’s injustice!” the other Kauravas called, raising their fists.

Yudhishtir waited for their voices to die down. “My brothers, it is fair. This laborer has followed others all his life because he is poor. He is uneducated. When he participated in killing that man, he was only following the lead of his

friends, foolish though that was. Therefore his sentence is four years. The merchant, however, is more educated and his family holds wealth. He didn't have to do what anyone told him to. Therefore his sentence is eight years. The warrior's crime, though, is much worse because a warrior's duty is to protect others, not hurt them. He has misused his training and shamed his weapons and therefore I give him sixteen years in prison. But the last, the Pundit, his crime is worst of all. He is a learned man. His path should be non-violence. In violating his own dharma he deserves the harshest punishment yet he is a Pundit and above my station. Therefore I send this murderer to Guru Kripa."

Kripacharya and Dronacharya were smiling, proud of Yudhishtir's reasoning. Bheeshma was also smiling, as were Vidur and the sages.

"But they killed someone," Shakuni said. "They should die."

"We have already lost one life," Yudhishtir said. "To lose four more would be a foolish waste."

"It's still not fair," Shakuni said. "You're treating them all differently."

"It's not fair to treat everyone the same when they are not," Yudhishtir replied.

"Glory to Prince Yudhishtir!" a courtier called, raising his fist. The warriors joined in. "Glory to Prince Yudhishtir!" So did the sages, the merchants, the laborers. "Glory to Prince Yudhishtir!" The Pandavas raised their fists also, grinning at each other.

Outside, the roar of the people was unmistakable as they joined in. "Glory! Glory! Glory!" Everyone was chanting Yudhishtir's glory while the Kauravas sat in silence.

Vidur gestured to the guards to take the sentenced criminals away. Then Vidur put his hand up to calm the crowd. "Your Majesty," Vidur said, "who shall be our heir?"

Dhritarashtra was sitting quietly, his hands holding the throne as if he sat on a boat in treacherous waters. He swallowed. "I declare that Yudhishtir, son of Kunti and Pandu and descendent of King Bharat, shall be Crown Prince and heir to Hastinapur."

The crowd went wild, dancing and cheering, hugging each other. They stamped their feet and clapped their hands and shouted praises to the Almighty.

Bheeshma clapped his hands also, laughing in joy. He saw the fulfillment of his vows in this moment. Yudhishtir was a worthy heir and would keep Hastinapur safe. Bheeshma would be able to die in peace knowing that he'd not failed his father.

As the Pundits chanted mantras from the Vedas, Kripacharya applied the sacred *tilak* to Yudhishtir's forehead, anointing him heir to the throne. Yudhishtir sought the blessings of his elders.

Dronacharya embraced him and Kunti blessed him that he may outshine his father. Gandhari was disappointed that Duryodhan would not be king but she still smiled and kissed Yudhishtir on the forehead in genuine love.

Dhritarashtra embraced Yudhishtir, straining to look pleased. *Always*, Dhritarashtra thought. *Always, the throne is taken from me.*



25. Conspiracy at Varnavat

The Kauravas were furious but they were not beaten. They knew that their father didn't really favor Yudhishtir. They also knew that they might change their fortunes with time. It didn't matter to them what the people wanted or what the country needed.

Duryodhan sat down to discuss it with Dushasan, Karn, and his uncle Shakuni.

"Challenge them on the battlefield," Karn said to Duryodhan. "Let the battle decide who shall be king."

"We can't beat them on the battlefield," Shakuni scoffed. "And why make our intentions clear to the people when it's not necessary?" Shakuni looked at Duryodhan. "This friend of yours is a foolish young man."

Karn leaped to his feet. "I'm a warrior, not a politician. I follow honor, not plots."

"And how will your honor make the people follow Duryodhan instead of Yudhishtir, fool?" Shakuni said. "Sit down and listen to your betters."

Karn was about to storm out when Duryodhan caught his arm. "Don't leave, Karn," he said. "I need your help. This is about my future."

Karn sat down again.

"I've been in talks with the architect Purochan," Shakuni said. "He is building us a beautiful palace in Varnavat."

The three young men were blank-faced.

Shakuni toyed with his dice. Gambling was his favorite form of entertainment and he was always holding dice. "Purochan is building this palace using only the most flammable materials. *Ghee*, oil, wax, wood, straw. One spark and the entire place will go up in flames. The festival of Lord Shiv at the town of Varnavat is a famous annual affair. The King has been attending but, traditionally, it is the Crown Prince who should celebrate with the people of Varnavat. This year, Yudhishtir will go."

"And then he stays in that palace and is burned down," Karn concluded, stone-faced. "Such plotting not worthy of a warrior, Duryodhan. Don't agree to this."

Duryodhan took a deep breath.

Karn leaned towards him. "Whatever your quarrel with Yudhishtir, he's a fine warrior. He deserves to die on the battlefield, not in his bed, burning alive."

"You can't defeat the Pandavas on the field," Shakuni cried. "This is the only way."

"It's not the only way," Karn said. "You're better than this, Duryodhan."

Duryodhan ran his hand through his thick black hair. "When will Purochan be finished with the building?"

"Not long," Shakuni said. "You must speak to your father soon about sending Yudhishtir to Varnavat."

"I want it over with. I'll talk to him tonight." Duryodhan glanced at Karn. "Are you with me?"

Karn clenched his teeth, tilting his head up to the ceiling. "Yes."

Later that night, Duryodhan sat in private with his father.

Dhritarashtra was confused. "But why do you want Yudhishtir to go for the festival in Varnavat? That will only cement his position as heir."

"No, it won't," Duryodhan said.

"But if you and I go then the people can celebrate with us and-"

"Father!" Duryodhan snapped. "I want Yudhishtir to go. If he does then just know this... He won't be heir for much longer."

Dhritarashtra blinked his blind eyes. "What are you planning?"

Duryodhan said nothing.

After a long pause, Dhritarashtra nodded. "Very well, I'll inform him of the trip in the morning." Dhritarashtra summoned Yudhishtir to a private meeting and informed Yudhishtir of his duty to attend the festival at Varnavat.

Yudhishtir was delighted. "I'm happy to go, Your Majesty. I have one request that Mother Kunti and my younger brothers may go with me."

Dhritarashtra smiled. "Of course they may."

When Duryodhan and Shakuni found out what Yudhishtir wanted, they almost died of happiness. All five Pandavas and their mother too!

The night before the Pandavas were to leave for the festival, Shakuni's spies informed him that Vidur was on his way to visit the Pandavas.

He must know something, Shakuni thought.

Immediately, Shakuni gathered Duryodhan and some Kauravas and went to the Pandavas' quarters also. They arrived just as Vidur was being welcomed by Yudhishtir, leaving Vidur with no opportunity to speak with the crown prince alone. The Kauravas joked and laughed with the Pandavas, acting as if they were great friends.

Vidur waited for a gap in the conversation. "Be careful on your journey," Vidur said casually. "It is the season of the *palash* and when the *palash* flower blooms, it looks as if the whole forest is on fire."

"Yes," Shakuni said. "The *palash* flower is very beautiful."

“Tell me,” Vidur said, looking around at all his nephews, “who is safe in a forest fire? Duryodhan?”

Duryodhan looked blank and Yudhishtir rescued him. “A rat is safe in a forest fire, Uncle. It hides in its hole.”

“Correct, my dear Yudhishtir,” Vidur said. “Well, it’s late and I should get some sleep. Not all of us are going on vacation in the morning!”

Everyone laughed as Vidur left. The Kauravas were about to leave also when Yudhishtir entreated them to stay, so happy that they were on such good terms with each other. Shakuni proposed a dice match and they played all night long.

But the next night, when the Pandavas, Kunti, and their armed escort camped after a day’s travel, Yudhishtir thought over and over on Vidur’s words. *A forest fire. The palash flower looks like a forest fire. A rat is safe in a forest fire.* Yudhishtir knew that Vidur was warning him of a fire. He told his brothers that one of them would stand guard each night. Even as he said the words he was sad that the Kauravas couldn’t live in peace.

When the Pandavas reached Varnavat, the famous architect, Purochan, was there to greet them. He showed them the palace he had built for the occasion and it was stunningly beautiful. So many graceful carvings and arches and paintings. The Pandavas were awed, as were their visitors. Yudhishtir received many dignitaries and city folk who brought gifts to the crown prince.

One such visitor was a laborer who came bearing a rat in a cage. “He’s good at digging tunnels,” he told the crown prince.

Yudhishtir put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “How is Uncle Vidur?”

The man was a skilled miner and had come to dig a tunnel for their escape. Vidur sent a message through him that Duryodhan planned to set the palace on fire on the day of the new moon.

When Yudhishtir told his mother and younger brothers, they argued about what to do. “We should immediately challenge Duryodhan!” Bheem said.

“With what proof?” Yudhishtir said. “We cannot accuse Duryodhan of conspiracy when we have no witnesses, no records, no testimonies. All we

know is that this palace is set to burn and that Purochan has built no escape for us. If we now reveal to our enemies what we know then they'll simply find a different way to kill us," he concluded. "Uncle Vidur advises escape and I agree with his counsel. Only when we have allies, able to defend against any plots, should we return to Hastinapur."

The miner crafted the tunnel and the Pandavas and Kunti went about each day as if everything was fine. They received the people and attended ceremonies and laughed and joked and feasted. It was Lord Shiv's festival and they sat in prayers each day, asking the Lord for a way to protect Hastinapur from the Kauravas.

The nights became darker. The new moon day approached.



26. Safety

Back in Hastinapur, Gandhari thought with pleasure about how the Pandavas must be enjoying Varnavat and Lord Shiv's festival.

Then she had a dream. She dreamed that Shiv came to her and started to perform the *tandav nritya*, the dance of destruction. Then a fire began and she was trapped inside her house with her hundred sons. They all ran around, looking for a way out, except there was none. She prayed to Shiv to save them but he didn't answer.

Gandhari awoke, sweating and shaking, and she told her husband of her dream. "Something terrible is going to happen," she cried. "My lord, I'm afraid. Shiv is warning me!"

"Nothing will happen," Dhritarashtra said. "It was just a dream."

"No," she said. "Something terrible will happen. I know it."

Purochan was eagerly waiting to kill the Pandavas. He'd been given much wealth by Shakuni and Duryodhan for the deed and when the Pandavas were dead he would retire in luxury. The night before the fire was to be set, he relaxed in his quarters that were at the front of the palace. He chatted with the head guard who was also in Shakuni's pay.

Sahadev was on watch duty that night and he crept into Purochan's chambers. He heard Purochan and the head guard joking about how easy it was to kill such mighty warriors as the Pandavas.

He ran back to his brothers. "They're celebrating our death already out there," he told them. "It's time to act."

The tunnel was complete. It opened into Yudhishtir's own bedroom and they uncovered it beneath the rug and marble tiles.

Kunti pulled Sahadev to her. "You go first, my darling." Sahadev went down into the tunnel and she followed, along with Nakul, Arjun, and Yudhishtir.

Bheem was last. He took an oil lamp from the bedside table. Silently, he strode through the palace until he reached Purochan's quarters at the front. The head guard had already left the building for watch duty. Bheem touched the lamp to the drapes over the doorway. The wall was instantly aflame. Bheem ran back to Yudhishtira's bedroom, lighting furniture and doors.

He threw the lamp down and dove into the tunnel, covering the opening with the marble tiles.

The Pandavas ran through the tunnel to its exit by the river. A boatman loyal to Vidur was waiting with a change of clothes for each of them and they rode with him across the river to a place unfrequented by travelers. Safely on the other shore, Yudhishtir took off a golden necklace and held it out to the man.

"Oh no, Crown Prince," the boatman said. "I require no payment to perform my dharma."

Yudhishtir embraced him. "We thank you, loyal and honest citizen."

"And I thank you, Crown Prince. Your people will await your return."

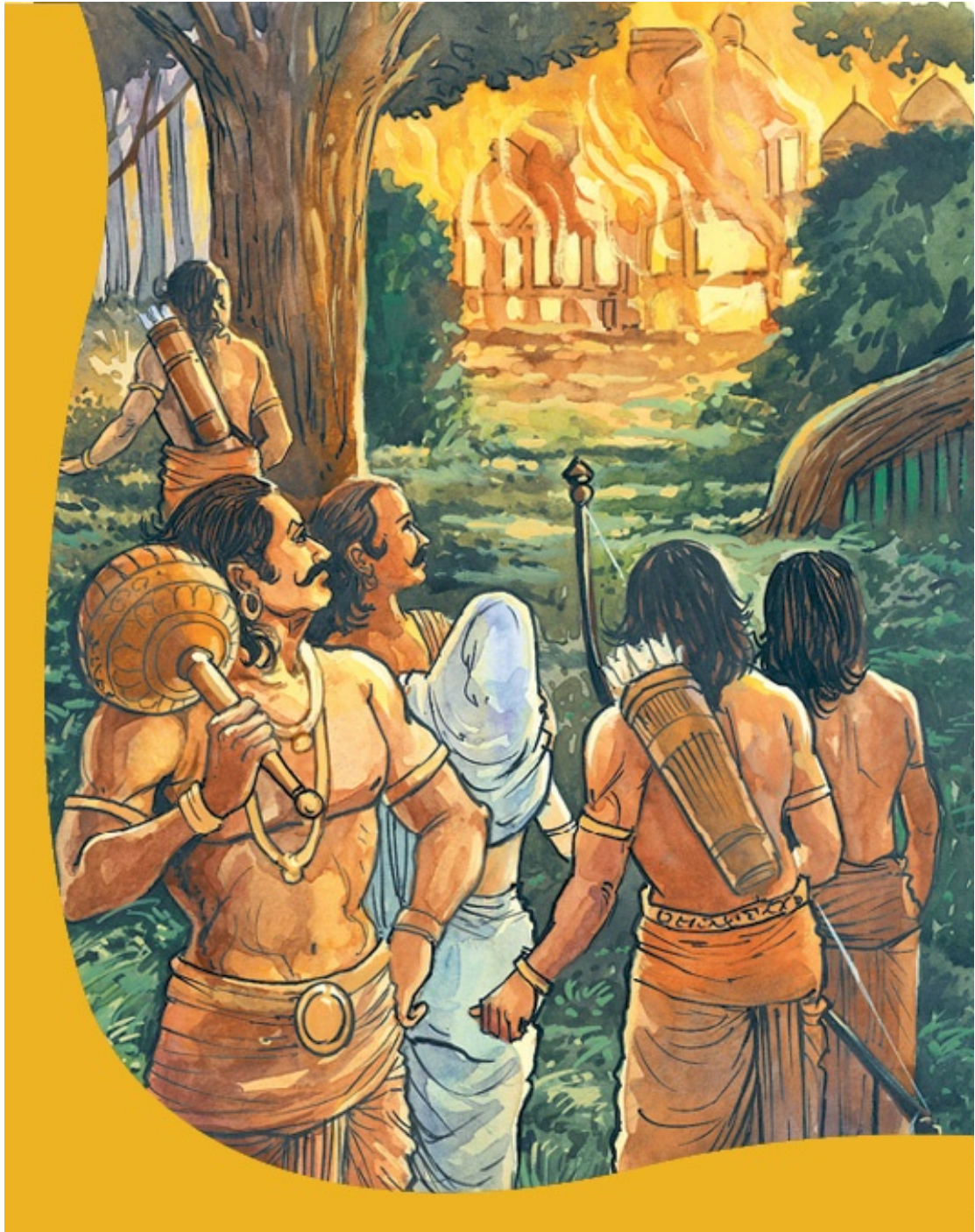
The Pandavas were wary of being followed by Duryodhan's spies so they ran like fire through the forest. Bheem carried Kunti but he was too fast and Nakul and Sahadev fainted from exertion. Bheem then lifted them into his arms and carried them too, continuing to run with Arjun and Yudhishtir on either side of him. When the run was too much for even them, Bheem carried Arjun and Yudhishtir also, rushing like a raging river through the trees.

Finally, when they were miles away and there was no sign of pursuit, Bheem set his family on the ground. He fetched water from a nearby spring to revive them.

Arjun sat up with a jolt. "Where are we?"

"In the deepest part of the jungle," Bheem said.

Yudhishtir was awake also. "It's said demons roam here. We must keep a guard each night." He shook Nakul and Sahadev awake.



Bheem wasn't tired at all. He was furious. "Why should we have to live like this?" he exploded. "We are princes! You are Crown Prince! Yet here we are, hiding like rats—"

"Because that is what is safe." Yudhishtir finished. "I understand your anger, Bheem, but we must stay calm. If Duryodhan finds out we're still alive—"

"I'm happy to never return to Hastinapur," Kunti said. "What has that place ever given me but sorrow? They tried to kill my Bheem when he was only a

child. Now they try to kill all of you. I never want to go back!"

"And yet we must, Mother," Arjun said. "Elder Brother is Crown Prince. We are trained to protect the nation. We must fulfill our dharma towards Hastinapur."

"Just not yet," Sahadev concluded. Everyone looked at him because normally he was so quiet. "At present we're in this forest," he said. "We should make the best of it."

They looked around them at the woods. Above them, birds made night calls. Looming in the dark was the threat of demons, wild animals, and all kinds of dangers.

They were disguised in the plain clothes of wandering mendicants, barefoot, with no possessions but their weapons. Just yesterday they'd been wearing silk, eating delicacies and sleeping on lush bedding. Now the humble ground was their bed.

Kunti sighed. She'd been in exile before. "Let us sleep."

For the next several weeks Kunti and her sons traveled westwards, far away from Hastinapur and the reach of Duryodhan's spies. They skirted towns, cities, even villages, remaining hidden and anonymous, even though they were the most famous warriors of the land.

Unknown to the Pandavas, a tribal woman and her five sons had slept in the palace at Varnavat that night. They'd come there for food and perished in the fire. When their remains were discovered in the ashes along with Purochan's, Duryodhan and his friends thought they were the Pandavas and Kunti.

The Kauravas celebrated their victory with Duryodhan's anointment as crown prince of Hastinapur.



देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥

*dehino 'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanaṁ jarā
tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati*

Just as the embodied soul continuously passes
from childhood to youth to old age, similarly, at
the time of death, the soul passes into another
body. The wise are not deluded by this.

Bhagavad Gita 2.13



27. Forest Fight

One night in the forest, Bheem kept guard while his brothers slept. He'd disguised himself in the shadows of shrubbery, watching over his family.

In a treehouse close by, a young *rakshasi* named Hidimba waited for her brother to return home.

There was a faint rustle and her giant of a brother, Hidimb, appeared in the doorway. "I'm hungry," he grunted and she quickly brought food to him. He looked at the plate in disgust. "Where is the meat? I return home from a long journey and there is no meat!"

Hidimba turned pale. "I thought you would like this. I have honeycomb and this rice was growing wild on the eastern slope-"

"I don't care about rice!" He took a swig from the clay jug she set before him, then made a face and spat it out. "Milk! Where is the wine?"

She grimaced. "We ran out. I didn't make anymore because I don't like it."

"Why not?" he roared. "No meat and no wine! Are you trying to kill me?"

She blanched. "Brother, you know I'm not fond of wine or meat. The blood-"

"That's the best bit!" What is wrong with you, Hidimba? How will I marry you

off if you can't even serve a man meat and wine when he wants it? Go and get me some meat."

"I don't like to kill-

"Shut your mouth. You will disgrace our family if you say such things. I smelled humans on the way here. Go and get them for my meal."

Hidimba sighed. She leaped from the hut, her beaded hair flying behind her. Landing in a crouch, she sniffed the air and then followed her nose to the humans. She hated to kill, and especially hated killing humans. She didn't like to harm anyone. But if she returned home with nothing then her brother would beat her.

She approached the salty sweet scent of humans and climbed a tree to spy upon them. There were four brothers and a mother, sleeping close together. But her nose told her there was someone else. If she hadn't been able to smell him, she would never have known he was there because he had concealed himself so thoroughly.

Keeping watch, she concluded. She'd have to kill him first, then his brothers.

An insect moved and the hidden man turned his head. Hidimba froze. The moonlight caught an angle of his face, highlighting his high cheekbones and square jaw. He had deep dark eyes. His hair was long and clean and wavy, curling around his muscled shoulders. He was huge, almost as big as her brother!

As she watched him, Hidimba felt something stir inside her. Something soft and warm and aching.

He turned away and she backed out of the shrubbery, taking the time to gain proper distance from him. She had to save him from her brother. No matter what, she couldn't let this human die.

She used her magical powers to change her clothes from the grass garments and beads of her people to a soft pink sari. She would go to the man and tell him danger was nearby. She would urge him to take his family away from here. Just as she was about to approach, Hidimb grabbed her arm. "What are you doing?" His voice was low.

The hairs on her body stood on end. "Nothing, brother."

He loomed over her. "The humans are right before you. Kill them."

"I-I-I can't. I-I love him."

Hidimb's dreadlocks literally shook, he was so aghast. "Love? You love a human?"

"Please don't hurt him. I'll do anything--"

"You dare to beg for him!" He lifted his hand to strike her but his fist was pulled back.

Hidimba blinked and saw the man she loved behind Hidimb, holding his arm.

"You dare to raise your hand to a lady?" Bheem snarled and flipped Hidimb over on his back. Bheem didn't know who this *rakshas* was but there was no excuse for striking a woman.

The demon rolled to his feet and aimed a blow at Bheem's throat. They wrestled each other, one minute Bheem gaining advantage, the next the demon.

The *rakshas* kicked Bheem away. Panting, Bheem was about to lunge forward again when he saw the vicious looking demon grow. A split-second later, he was double his original size and getting bigger still.

Bheem smiled inwardly. This *rakshas* thought larger size made him formidable but all it did was make him into a bigger target.

The demon was now as big as a tree and moved to stamp Bheem into the ground. Bheem waited for just the right moment to slide away and strike the man's ankle. Just as he would have, something pulled him to the opposite side. Bheem blinked, looking at the ground, wondering what happened.

He didn't realize that it was the lady who'd done it but his brothers and Kunti saw. They'd woken to the sounds of fighting and rushed to see. When the younger Pandavas would have stepped in to help Bheem, Yudhishtir held them back. "Two against one isn't fair," he said. Meanwhile, they all saw the woman use magical force to pull Bheem clear of danger.

Again and again she pulled Bheem clear until Bheem finally realized what was happening. He tried to motion to her to stop, to get out of danger, but she didn't listen so he turned and ran.

The *rakshas* pursued, laughing.

As Bheem passed a tree, he leaped onto a branch, then onto another, getting higher and higher until he matched the demon's height. He paused, concealed in the thick branches.

Hidimb stopped, smelling the man. He was about to grab when Bheem jumped, landing on his neck, smashing a fist into the *rakshas*'s pine.

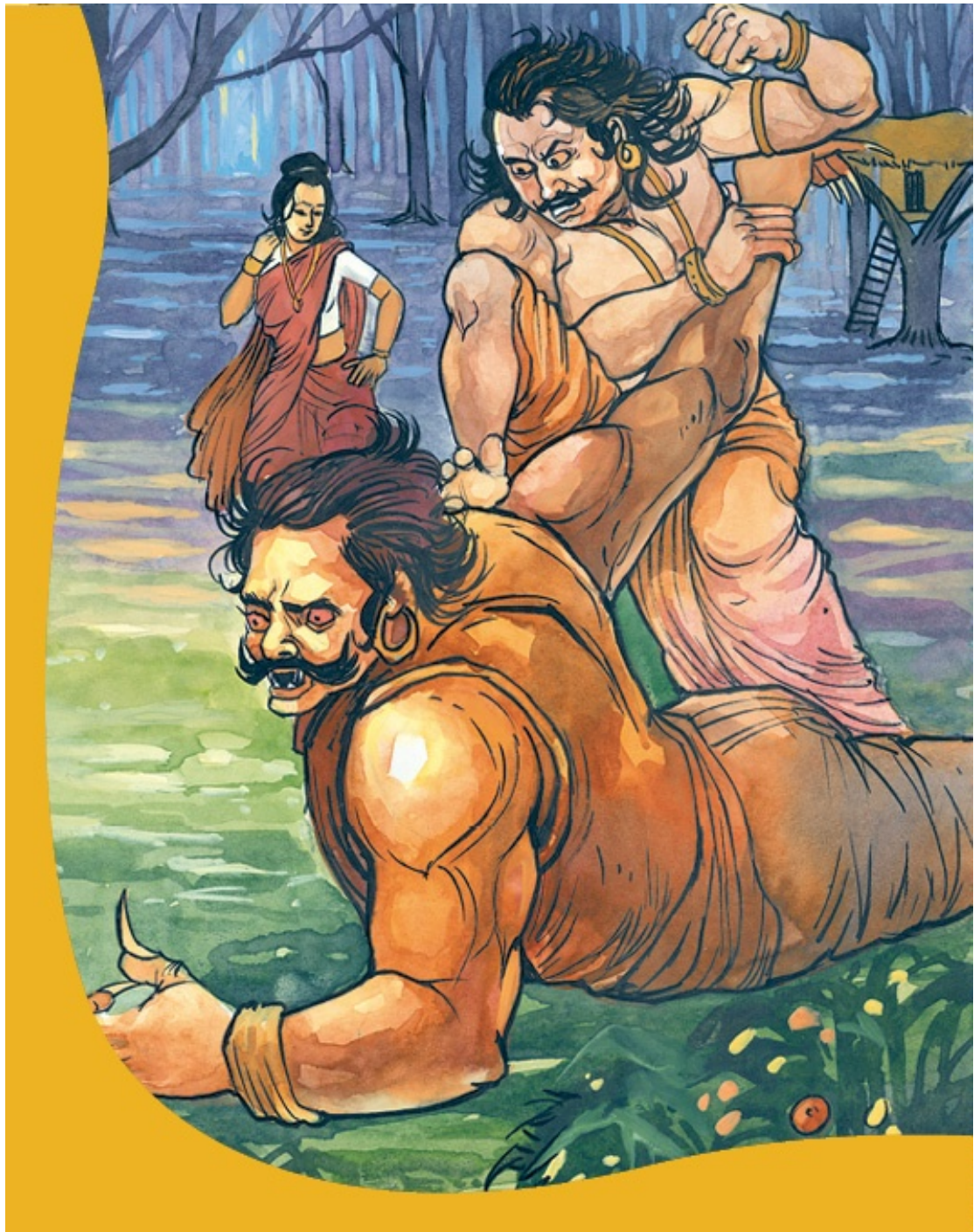
The demon's roar was cut off as his spine shattered, his big lumbering body falling. Bheem slid down his back, landing another blow at the center of his ribs, completing the task. Hidimb's body collapsed onto the ground.

There was silence in the forest until Kunti rushed forwards to check her son for injuries. The Pandavas ran forward to congratulate Bheem on his victory.

Bheem explained that he'd overheard the *rakshas* planning to kill them, as well as almost striking the lady.

The pretty lady was standing off to the side, staring at the dead body. Kunti moved towards her, concerned. "Where do you live, my dear?" Kunti asked. "We'll take you home."

The lady burst into tears. Kunti embraced her, crooning comforting sounds. "It's alright. You're safe. My son has made sure of it. What's your name? Where's your home?"



“He was my home,” the lady said, pointing to the dead *rakshas*. “My name is Hidimba and he was my brother Hidimb.”

The Pandavas looked in horror at Bheem, who was stunned. He’d not known. How could he have known?

“He was all I had. Now I’m an orphan,” Hidimba wept.

“I-I-” Bheem stuttered.

"It's not your fault!" Hidimba said. "My brother was cruel. He would have killed you all." She continued weeping as Kunti patted her back. "But he was my brother..."

"What can we do, my dear?" Kunti asked her.

"I wish to marry your son," Hidimba said, looking at Bheem.

Bheem felt himself blush all over as his brothers turned to him.

Kunti took a deep breath. "You should know that my son, Bheem, is a warrior. He has responsibilities elsewhere. That means that even if he married you, he wouldn't be able to stay with you."

"I know," Hidimba said softly. "But if we had a son then I would have family."

Kunti turned to Yudhishtir. "What does dharma say?"

"It says Bheem must fulfill his responsibilities as a warrior. It also says he cannot leave this woman without the protection of family. It is your decision, Mother."

Everyone was quiet as Kunti considered. She looked from the dead *rakshas* to Bheem to Hidimba. She reached out for Bheem's hand. "Come here," she ordered.

Bheem's heart fluttered as his mother pulled him towards the lady.

She linked their hands. "May you be happy together."

Bheem stayed with Hidimba for a year while the others traveled on. In that time, Hidimba gave birth to a son named Ghatotkach, a combination of Bharat heritage and demon blood. When Ghatotkach was just a few moments old, he grew into a small child with immense strength.

The Pandavas sent a message that they were in the city of Ekchakra, hiding as the guests of a Pundit. They sent blessings on the news of Hidimba's son. Bheem needed to join them.

Bheem was worried about Hidimba taking care of Ghatotkach all by herself. He was worried about Ghatotkach growing up with so much strength and not knowing how to control it. Bheem spent days talking to his son. He told Ghatotkach to help and serve others, not hurt them. Bheem explained that

the Bharat clan always protected, never oppressed.

Then, after embracing Hidimba with a heavy heart, Bheem left them.



28. Tribute in Ekchakra

The Pandavas thought of Bheem every day. They missed him at mealtimes. They missed how he would insist on taking first guard duty every night. They even missed how he would lose his temper and snap at them when they insisted he could not jump into a fight. They were all too quiet without him.

Kunti tried not to worry, knowing that Hidimba would take good care of Bheem. Still, her mother's heart couldn't help but pine for him.

When he appeared in the doorway of their guest rooms in the Pundit's house, they were sitting down to eat.

Sahadev saw him first. He dropped his handful of rice and leaped up. "Brother Bheem!" Everyone rushed to embrace Bheem except for Nakul, who paused to gather another plate and pile food on it. It was their habit since childhood that half of everyone's portion was given to Bheem.

"Trust Brother Bheem to turn up now," Arjun said, "when dinner's ready!"

Everyone laughed.

"You look well," Kunti said, hugging her son. "Hidimba's been taking good care of you."

"Clearly," Arjun said. "That's why he stayed so long!"

His brothers howled with laughter and Bheem blushed but he couldn't help smiling. "Shut up, Arjun," he muttered.

"So?" Yudhishtir said, as he slung an arm around Bheem's shoulders and led him to their dining area. They sat down. "How is our son?"

Bheem proceeded to tell them how Ghatotkach had grown so fast and had amazing strength. They listened, eating and interrupting with questions. Kunti asked about Hidimba's health and as Bheem talked about Hidimba's recovery from childbirth, they heard a sudden wail in the house.

Kunti looked up in alarm. "That's our host's wife."

The brothers looked at each other, worried.

She stood up. "Eat. I'll go see."

She didn't return until an hour later, when they were resting together after their meal. She looked at Yudhishtir, then her gaze flickered to Bheem. "We must help our host. His family is under a terrible burden."

"What burden?" Nakul asked.

"It's a calamity," Kunti said. "This city is held captive by a *rakshas* named Bakasur. He has controlled the city for the past thirteen years since he killed Ekchakra's king."

Yudhishtir was incredulous. "But we've never even seen this *rakshas*!"

"He lives outside the city. The elders keep him away by sending a tribute of a feast and a human every month."

"They send *what*?" Bheem said.

"It's better than before they made those terms with him. Before that, Bakasur would just come to the city whenever he wanted and eat people in one house, usually their women and children. At least with a tribute, each family takes turns sending one person. It's fairer."

"And now it's our host's turn," Yudhishtir concluded, grasping the problem immediately. "One of us will go instead."

Kunti nodded. "Bheem, you've come to us at the right time."

Yudhishthir looked from her to Bheem and back again. "Bheem?" he said.
"Bheem!"

Kunti looked at her eldest in confusion.

"Why should my younger brother face such danger when I'm present to protect you all?" Yudhishthir said. Kunti raised her hands, denial on her lips but he continued, hurt written all over his face. "I'm elder and it's my duty to protect my family and my host. Yet you think only of Bheem. He has a wife and son to take care of, Mother. Why should he be offered as tribute to a demon?"

Kunti went up to Yudhishthir and took his hands in hers. "My dear," she said, "you say Bheem has a wife and son to take care of. You have a whole kingdom to take care of! You belong to Hastinapur and you always have. I cannot throw all of that away on a matter such as this."

"I'll go," Arjun said. "I don't have anyone to take care of."

"Who told you to speak?" Bheem snapped at him. "I'll go and that's the end of it."

"Bheem," Kunti said. "The tribute leaves tomorrow night at dusk. There will be a wagonload of food to drive to his cave. Our host will tell you the way."

He nodded.

"Till then, rest." Kunti looked at each of her sons, ending with Yudhishthir. She still held his hands. "We must prepare."

The next evening, Bheem vaulted onto the wagon and took hold of the reins.

"Remember what I told you," Kunti said, her voice quiet.

He nodded and clucked his tongue. The bullocks walked on and the Pandavas watched Bheem go.

"How bad is this Bakasur?" Nakul said to Arjun, who'd asked people in the city.

Arjun's jaw tightened. "Bad."

Nakul looked after Bheem, worry in his eyes. "Does Mother know what she's

doing?”

Sahadev sighed. “She always knows what she’s doing.”

Bheem followed the Pundit’s directions and came to the cave entrance early in the evening. Bheem studied the terrain closely, noting where the ditches were, how far the trees grew from each other, where the rocks lay. He needed every advantage he could get. The biggest advantage though, was that Bakasur had no idea who Bheem was.

Bheem could hear the echoing drone of snores from the cave entrance. The *rakshas* was asleep.

Bheem’s tummy rumbled. He looked at the great feast that stuffed the wagon and started eating. *No use in letting it go stale*, he thought.

He worked his way through the spiced vegetables, the *roti* and other types of bread, the *daal*, the *pakor*as, the rice pudding and milk cakes and fruit. There were pots and pots and pots of food and Bheem emptied every pot he could find.

The ground trembled and Bheem turned to look behind him.

The *rakshas* was huge, with red eyes and thick red dreadlocks. His hands were claws, his clothes were greasy animal skins, and there was a layer of dirt all over him. The most striking thing, however, was that he had two horns sticking out of his skull. They looked like the horns of a goat, short but curling upwards, their points sharp. “You ate my food!” Bakasur roared.

“What did you expect?” Bheem said. “I don’t want to die hungry.”

“You’ll pay for this, human!” the demon shouted. He reached forward to grab Bheem by the neck.

Bheem ducked and punched Bakasur in the stomach.

Bakasur flew backwards, landing on his back.

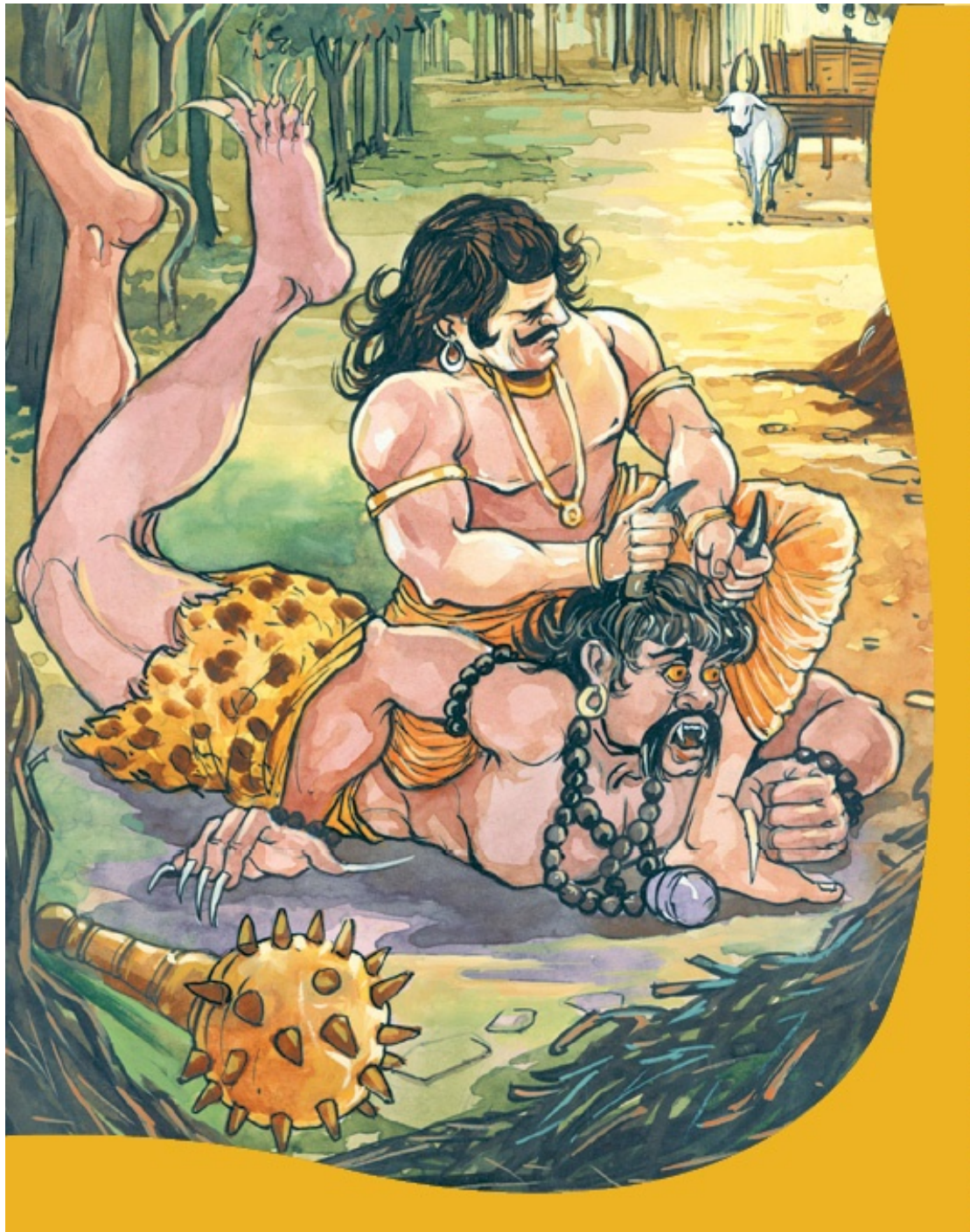
Bheem did a front flip off the wagon. He walked up to the prostrate *rakshas*. Bakasur grabbed his foot and pulled Bheem down, rolling on top of him. He bared his demon fangs, leaning down to rip Bheem’s neck open.

Bheem brought his legs up and rolled sideways so that Bakasur was now on

the ground. He punched the demon in the mouth, thinking Bakasur would be dazed. Only he wasn't. He retaliated immediately with a punch to Bheem's ear, making him dizzy.

The fight continued for hours, with Bakasur sometimes gaining advantage, sometimes Bheem controlling the blows. Hidimb hadn't been this difficult to subdue but Hidimb hadn't been this cunning. Bakasur would pretend fatigue, then attack a second later. He'd play dead, then go for Bheem's throat. He even made mimics of human voices that echoed from the trees so Bheem was distracted, worried that others were close to danger.

He is lies, Bheem thought. But all lies are fundamentally weak. What is his weakness?



Bheem managed to get Bakasur's chest pinned against the ground, with his knee digging into the demon's back. Bheem grabbed Bakasur's horns and twisted them. The *rakshas* howled and Bheem realized the horns were sensitive. In their whole fight, the demon had never once used them. Bheem held on and twisted...

The Pandavas sat up all night, tense and silent. Dawn was an hour away. When Bheem climbed through the window, Kunti didn't look at all surprised.

She pointed to the blood on his body: "Is it yours?" When he shook his head, she pointed to the bundle of food she'd packed and ordered the younger Pandavas to bring it. Bheem lifted her through the window and the other Pandavas followed, with Yudhishtir as the last, silently closing the window behind him.

In the morning the Pundit found the entire town at his door. "We're in your debt!" the citizens cried, showering him with flowers. He was bewildered and several of them, through excited sentences, revealed that Bakasur was dead. "It wasn't me," he told them. "It was my guests."

"Then where are these heroes? We'll give them anything they desire as reward," they said. They searched the house but the heroes had already vanished, desiring nothing.

"How did you do it?" Arjun asked as a newly washed Bheem carried Kunti on his shoulder through the forest. "How did you destroy Bakasur?"

"It was simple," Bheem said. "The truth always destroys lies."



29. Challenge

The Pandavas continued through the forest. There they met many sages, who told them the history of the great lineages, including their own. One night they met a *Gandharva*, a celestial being, who knew that they were the Pandavas.

“Why do you not travel with your priest?” he asked them. “Warriors who travel without a Pundit guide are like unlit lamps in the dark.”

Yudhishtir asked the *Gandharva* where they would find a priest suitable for their family and he sent them in the direction of Sage Dhaumya, who lived deep in the forest. Dhaumya, an expert in the Vedas and pure in every way, consented to be their priest. The Pandavas were filled with joy at this blessing, thinking that it could not be long now before they regained their kingdom.

They traveled on and met sages who gave them news. King Drupad of Panchal, they said, was holding a *swayamvar* for his daughter, Princess Draupadi. The sages said there was a great mystery to Draupadi’s birth.

King Drupad had a feud with his childhood friend, Dronacharya. Because of this feud, he’d performed a *yajna* to attain a son who could kill Drona. Prince Dhrishtadyumna rose roaring from the fire, shining like flames and as he stepped from the *yajna* another child arose. It was a twin sister for

Dhrishtadyumna. She was of celestial beauty and for her dark skin she was named Krishnaa. As the daughter of Drupad, she was also named Draupadi.

She was born already a young maiden, ready for her *swayamvar*, and only Princess Rukmini rivaled her in divine qualities. Many kings and warriors from all over the land were traveling to Panchal to win her hand. She was said to be the incarnation of a *Devi*, for even Krishna stood at her side as loving friend and protector.

“Krishna?” Kunti asked them. “Krishna stands at her side?”

“He has declared that whoever marries Draupadi shall be his friend forever.”

Kunti looked at her sons. They stared back, excitement in their eyes.

“We should go to the *swayamvar*, Mother,” Arjun said.

“Yes,” Kunti said. “We will.”

They arrived in Kampilya, Panchal’s vast capital city. Its streets were decorated with *rangoli* while flower garlands bedecked doors and windows, suffusing the air with sweet scents. Banners flew from every rooftop while Pundits sat on each street corner, blessing the souls who passed them. The shops and markets were filled with exotic crafts and wares. Every citizen wore jewels and expensive garments. King Drupad was a powerful king with unequalled wealth and many allies.

On the outskirts of the city, the Pandavas and Dhaumya were invited to be the guests of a family of potters and they accepted the invitation. Kunti waited there and sent her sons with Dhaumya to the *swayamvar*.

The Pandavas stood with a group of Pundits in the *swayamvar arena*. “So many people,” Yudhishtir murmured to one of the elder Pundits.

“Yes,” the Pundit murmured back. “Even the evil Kauravas are here with Karn, King of Anga.”

All five Pandavas looked at the Pundit with interest. “You think the Kauravas are evil?” Yudhishtir asked.

“Of course I do. They killed the Pandavas at Varnavat,” the Pundit replied. “All of Bharat knows it, even though we have no proof. Now nothing is right with

the world. Duryodhan is Crown Prince in Hastinapur with Yudhishtir dead. Even this *swayamvar* that Drupad designed for Prince Arjun is bereft of Arjun's presence."

Arjun blinked. "He designed the *swayamvar* for Arjun?" he asked.

The Pundit nodded. "He wanted the greatest archer in the world for Draupadi. Now she must make do with what is left since Krishna has declared himself her friend. He will not compete for her hand."

Yudhishtir crooked his finger and his brothers huddled close. "No one makes a move until I say so," Yudhishtir told them.

"Be restrained," Dhaumya advised them.

The arena was a giant open-aired court lined with stands that the audience crowded into. The front rows were occupied by kings and princes, warriors from distant lands, along with their attendants and bodyguards. The floor was filled with dancers and acrobats who tumbled and swayed, entertaining the crowd.

In the middle of the marble floor was set a bow and five arrows and curiously, an empty set of giant scales, such as merchants used to weigh sacks of grain.

Drupad sat on his royal dais at the head of the arena, his throne studded with white diamonds and black opals, upholstered in golden silk. He rested his foot on a matching footstool shaped as a lion. On his right sat his sons, Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi. On his left sat his queen while next to the queen was an empty seat for Draupadi herself.

The conch shell was blown, its primal Om vibrating in the heart of every individual there. Then trumpets blared, drums rolled, and bells rang.

"On guard!" the herald called. "Kings, princes, warriors, on guard! She who is the daughter of Drupad; she who is the twin sister of Dhrishtadyumna; she who is risen from sacred fire, Princess Draupadi graces the arena!"

Soft melodious singing filled the court, the notes haunting and beautiful. The gate opened and Draupadi stood alone, framed by the doorway. Her form was petite and delicate. Her skin was dark and her lustrous hair was so black it seemed blue. She was dressed in a pure white sari, with golden jewelry and

white jasmines in her hair. Her eyes were black and large as lotus petals and her nails were red as copper. She stepped onto the marble floor with her dainty feet and proceeded to walk through the court, her ankle bells tinkling with each step.

A line of maidens slipped into formation behind her, their enchanting song following her.

The Pandavas were dumbstruck, unable to look away as Draupadi passed them.

She reached the dais and climbed the steps gracefully. She folded her hands and bowed to her father and brothers and another who was present there.

Arjun was startled when he saw a dark-skinned young man step out from behind the king's throne and raise his hand to bless Draupadi. He had a radiant form with eyes like lotuses and a peacock feather in his crown, just as Mother Kunti had described him!

The Pandavas simultaneously reached out to grab each other's hands, all recognizing him at the same time. It was Krishna!

Draupadi alone was stunning. Krishna alone was also stunning. But both of them together were a sight so beautiful it made the Pandavas' hearts ache. Both were dark and effulgent, like the center of the sacred fire.

Draupadi bowed to her mother and the Pundits, then took her seat, casting her gaze shyly downwards. Krishna resumed his seat behind the king. Bheem spotted a massive warrior next to Krishna. "That must be Balaram!" he said to Arjun.

Dhrishtadyumna stood. "Friends, allies, honored guests from far away," he called out in a thunderous voice, "today my sister, Draupadi, also called Krishnaa for her dark skin, will choose her husband. Do not think her hand will be easily won. Behold here a challenge." He raised his arm, indicating the heavy iron bow and arrows in the center of the court. "This mighty bow will be your instrument and five arrows will be your test.

"Study this scale now," Dhrishtadyumna said, indicating the curiosity next to the bow and arrows. "The center pole is so tall it reaches the sky above us."

Arjun looked and saw that the pole went up very far and held something at the top.

“At the peak is a golden fish that spins in a circle,” Dhrishtadyumna said, gesturing with his hands. “The eye of the fish shall be your target but you will not aim looking upwards. You will look below.”

The crowd leaned forward to peer at the base of the scales. There was a pool, Arjun saw, but the way the fluid stirred was not like water.

“A reflecting pool of oil is where you will gauge your target, after first balancing your stance upon the scales. The one who manages to do all of this and hit the eye of the fish shall be my sister’s husband.”

The warriors began to murmur how difficult the challenge was. Now the Pandavas understood in truth that Drupad had meant his daughter for Arjun. Only Arjun was a skilled enough archer to meet this challenge.

Kings and princes attempted the task. Some couldn’t lift the mighty bow. Some could lift but not bend the bow to string it. Some could string it but not set an arrow on it to release. Some could set an arrow but couldn’t balance on the scales. Some could balance but not look down into the oil. Some could look down but not hit the target.

Each and every one of them was laughed at by the crowd. Arjun watched but he didn’t laugh. He was trying to understand this challenge. Why a fish in the air? Why a pool of oil? Why scales?

Duryodhan and his brothers all failed. They returned to their places in silent fury and then Karn stood up. He lifted the bow and strung it, setting an arrow with ease. Gracefully, he balanced on the scales and looked downwards, then upwards, then downwards, counting the spins of the fish.

Draupadi was worried. She didn’t want to marry evil Duryodhan’s friend. Karn pulled his string back, ready to shoot, when Draupadi stood. “Stop.”

Karn froze.

She searched for some excuse. “I cannot marry the son of a charioteer.”

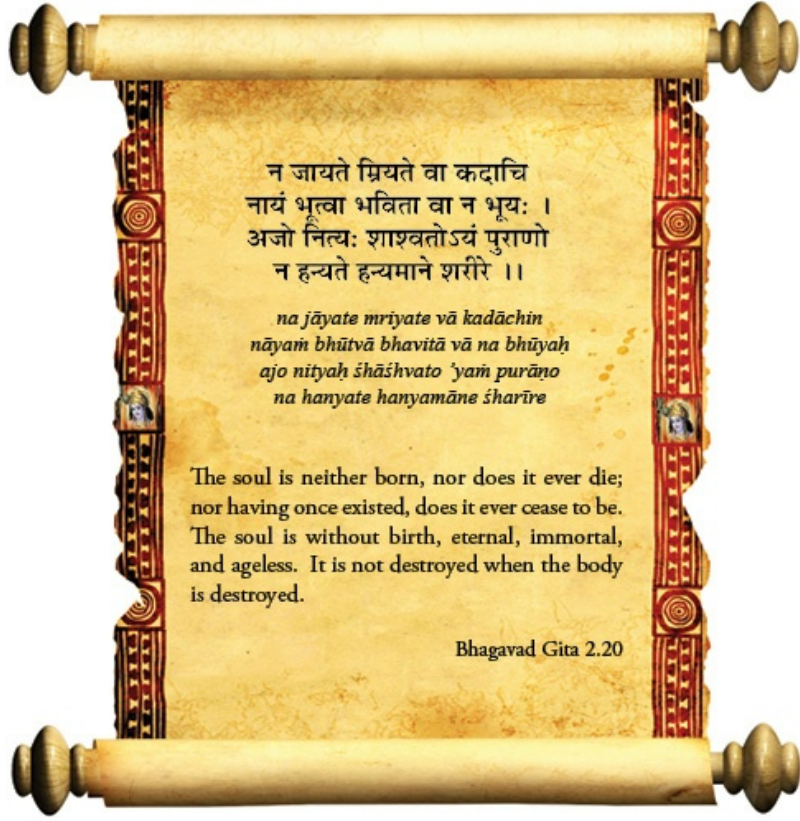
Karn’s golden skin burned with humiliation. He jumped off the scales and

threw the bow back onto the table, then returned to his seat beside Duryodhan.

No one else came forward. They were afraid to try.

Krishna looked directly at Arjun and nodded.

The Pandavas drew a collective breath. Yudhishtir tilted his head, telling Arjun to obey Krishna. Arjun bowed to Yudhishtir and Dhaumya and stepped onto the marble floor.



न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin
nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yaṁ purāṇo
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre*

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die;
nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be.
The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal,
and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body
is destroyed.

Bhagavad Gita 2.20



30. Krishnaa

As soon as the warriors saw that a humble mendicant was now attempting the challenge, they burst into laughter, jeering and taunting as he passed them. He wore his hair rolled up on his head and had grown his beard out so the Kauravas had no idea they were looking at Arjun.

He ignored them, heading straight for the dais. He bowed to the king and to Krishna behind the king.

Krishna smiled at the mendicant and Draupadi knew by Krishna's smile that this man was the one! He headed to the bow but before he lifted it, he looked at Draupadi and her heart thudded in her chest.

Arjun said a prayer before the bow, mindful of his guru's teachings to always be respectful of weapons. Then, remembering Krishna, he lifted the bow with ease and strung it, setting an arrow with swift skill. He leaped onto the scales and balanced almost immediately, gazing down into the reflecting pool.

He watched the fish go around and around in the oil, then looked up and noted that its actual spin was much faster. He counted above, he counted below.

It appears slow but it is fast, he thought. It seems real but it is fake.

He tilted his body to angle the bow and the scales wobbled.

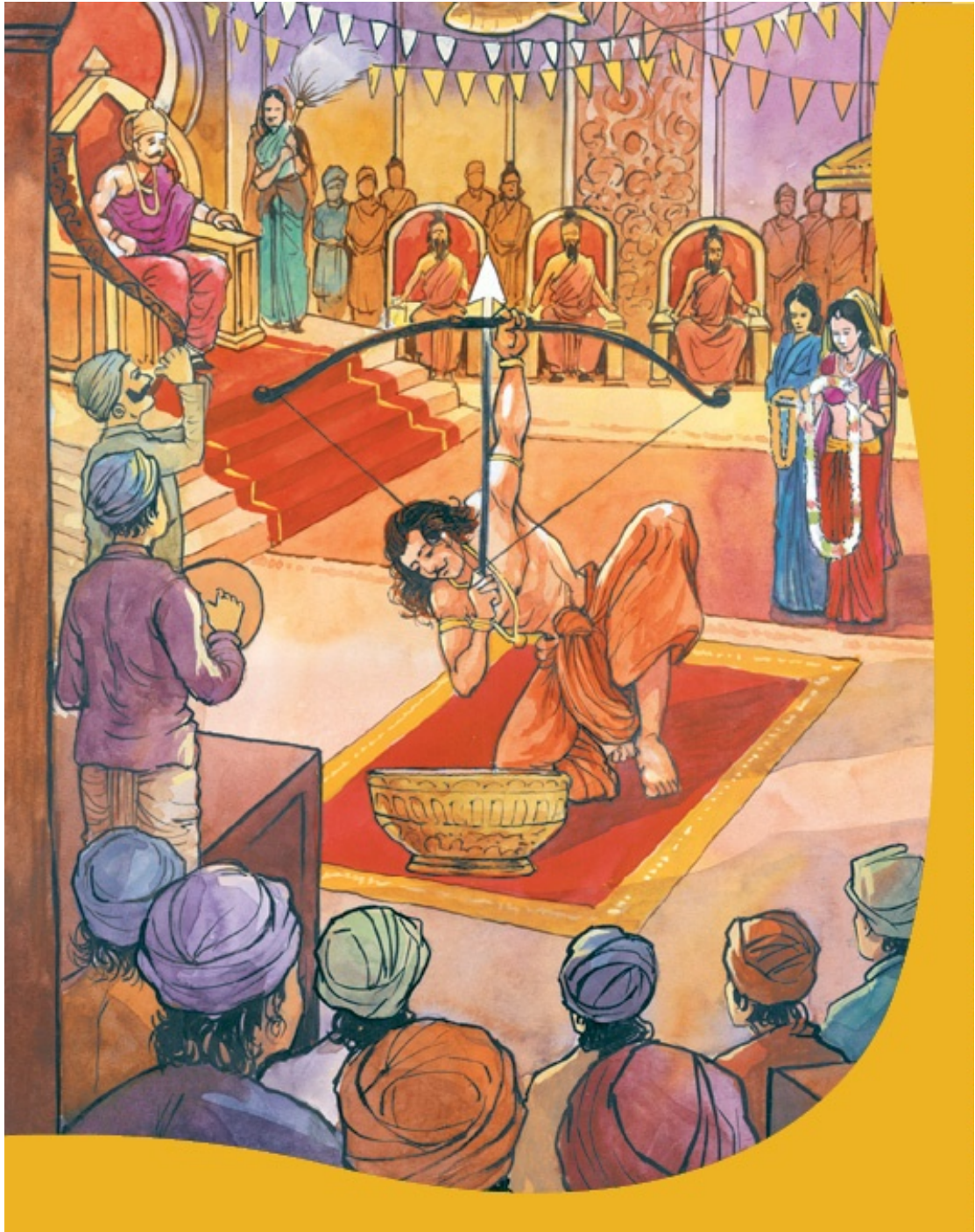
Balance, Arjun thought. Balance before the fake and the real, the fast and the slow. Five arrows, five senses. One bow. Balance them all.

Arjun breathed deeply, slowing his heart rate. His senses sharpened and he heard every whisper, felt every glance. He tasted the scent of Draupadi's flowers, smelled the drops of his sweat as he pulled the string back.

The target is in the sky, he thought. Reach the sky through the oil. Why oil?

He counted the spins. He closed his eyes, visualizing the challenge, trying to understand.

Oil is earth and fire... Arjun froze, realizing the key to the challenge. Fish is water. Arrow is the wind. Scales are the space between.



Draupadi is the pure mind. Balance the senses, balance the elements, to achieve a pure mind. That is why Krishna stands beside her. That is why he will be friend to whoever wins her...

Arjun opened his eyes, seeing only his target. That is why she is Krishnaa.

He shot.

The golden fish fell to the ground, Arjun's arrow sticking from its eye. From

the sky the *devatas* showered flowers onto Arjun.

“Glory to the mendicant! Glory to the mendicant!” the heralds of Panchal called, their cry being echoed by Panchal’s citizens. “Glory! Glory!”

Dhaumya leaned towards Yudhishtir. “It’s time to leave,” he said. “Or you’ll all be recognized.” Yudhishtir agreed. He told Bheem to stay behind to protect Arjun and Draupadi. Then together with Nakul and Sahadev, Yudhishtir and Dhaumya left the arena as the crowd cheered the mendicant.

Arjun headed towards Draupadi, still holding his bow and the remaining four arrows.

The warriors were glaring at Arjun, rising from their seats as their outrage grew.

“Are we to be insulted this way?” Duryodhan shouted. “That we warriors must be silent while a poor mendicant steals what’s ours?”

“My sister is not yours!” Dhrishtadyuma growled.

“Don’t blame us if you couldn’t fulfill the challenge,” Drupad snapped.

“A princess can only marry a warrior! Not a mendicant! We won’t allow it!” the other kings cried, coming forward to stand with Duryodhan.

“She must choose one of us,” Duryodhan said. “If she doesn’t then we’ll throw her back into the fire she came from.”

Arjun ran the last few steps to Draupadi and braced himself before the crowd, an arrow already cocked on his bow. Dhrishtadyumna ran to join him and they stood together as her shield.

Duryodhan led the kings as they charged.

Bheem ran through the crowd and jumped, taking a flying leap to soar over the heads of the kings. He landed between them and Arjun, doing a flip to absorb the extra momentum. He faced the men, snarling.

They rushed him and he ducked, sliding his leg beneath their feet, making them all topple to the marble floor. Before they could stand he reached to the side and grabbed a tree, uprooting it to use to bar their way. The people watched in stunned amazement.

Meanwhile, Karn's attendants had scrambled to bring Karn his bow and quiver. He took aim at Arjun from behind them all.

Arjun was too quick. He sliced Karn's bow in half with one arrow.

Karn stared at his broken bow, aghast. "Who are you?" he asked Arjun. "Only Lord Shiv, Indra, or Arjun himself could have broken my bow." When Arjun said nothing, Karn threw his useless weapon away. "I salute your guru, mendicant," he said and left the arena.

"My dear kings and princes," Krishna said. He raised his hands in a gesture of restraint. "Surely such unchivalrous behavior will not endear any of us to the lady. What princess would choose one of such uncouth, angry men?"

Those Bheem had felled struggled to their feet, shoving off any who reached to help them. Yet, having seen the might of both mendicants, they didn't wish to fight anymore.

"Perhaps we should ask Draupadi what she wants?" Krishna said innocently. "This is, after all, her *swayamvar* and who she marries will be her choice, by Bharat law. We all do abide by the law, do we not?"

The kings looked at each other, muttering under their breath.

"Krishnaa," Krishna said, smiling at Draupadi. "Who is your choice?"

She blushed. One of her ladies held her bridal garland on a silver plate and Draupadi lifted it in her delicate hands, the flowers and gems woven through it flashing in the sunlight. Sweet scent permeated the arena.

The daughter of fire stepped forward, ankle bells tinkling, and laid her garland around Arjun's neck. Arjun held out his hand and she took it, stepping down from the dais to join him.

"There," Krishna said. "She has made her choice and the man won her according to the rules announced by her brother. Let them leave in peace."

Draupadi and Arjun bowed to Krishna and Drupad. Krishna blessed them, embracing Arjun in jubilation as friend. King Drupad blessed them too although he was bewildered by this turn. Who was this simple mendicant who'd performed a feat only Arjun could have achieved?

Having bowed to her parents, the Pandits, and Krishna himself, Draupadi left the arena with the man who had won her. The huge mendicant who'd defended them both followed.

She was radiant with joy. Krishna had told her that his own other form would win her hand at her *swayamvar*. She'd thought that other form would be Arjun so when she'd heard that the Pandavas had died at Varnavat, Draupadi had thought she would never marry. Yet this mendicant had come for her and Krishna had smiled, and she now had her soul's mate.



31. Wishes and Boons

Draupadi followed her lord through the city, the crowds cheering and calling out blessings of good fortune. She smiled at her people, glad for their love.

The men walked on either side of her, keeping her protected between them. They were heading for the outskirts and she wondered where they lived. Her new husband seemed like a simple man, he probably had a hut somewhere in the forest. She would live with him there with his family, she thought happily.

“Mother will be so pleased to meet you,” her lord was saying and she blushed, for his voice was warm and tender. “You will be such a surprise!” he added.

The giant brother chuckled. “Quite a surprise,” he said, and smiled down at her. She liked him very much. He was so gentle to her even though he’d been so ferocious with those frightening men.

“I know!” her husband said. “We’ll play a prank.”

“Arjun...” the big brother said.

Draupadi stopped in her tracks, staring between them. *Arjun? Is this the Arjun?* She looked at the huge man. “Then that means you are...”

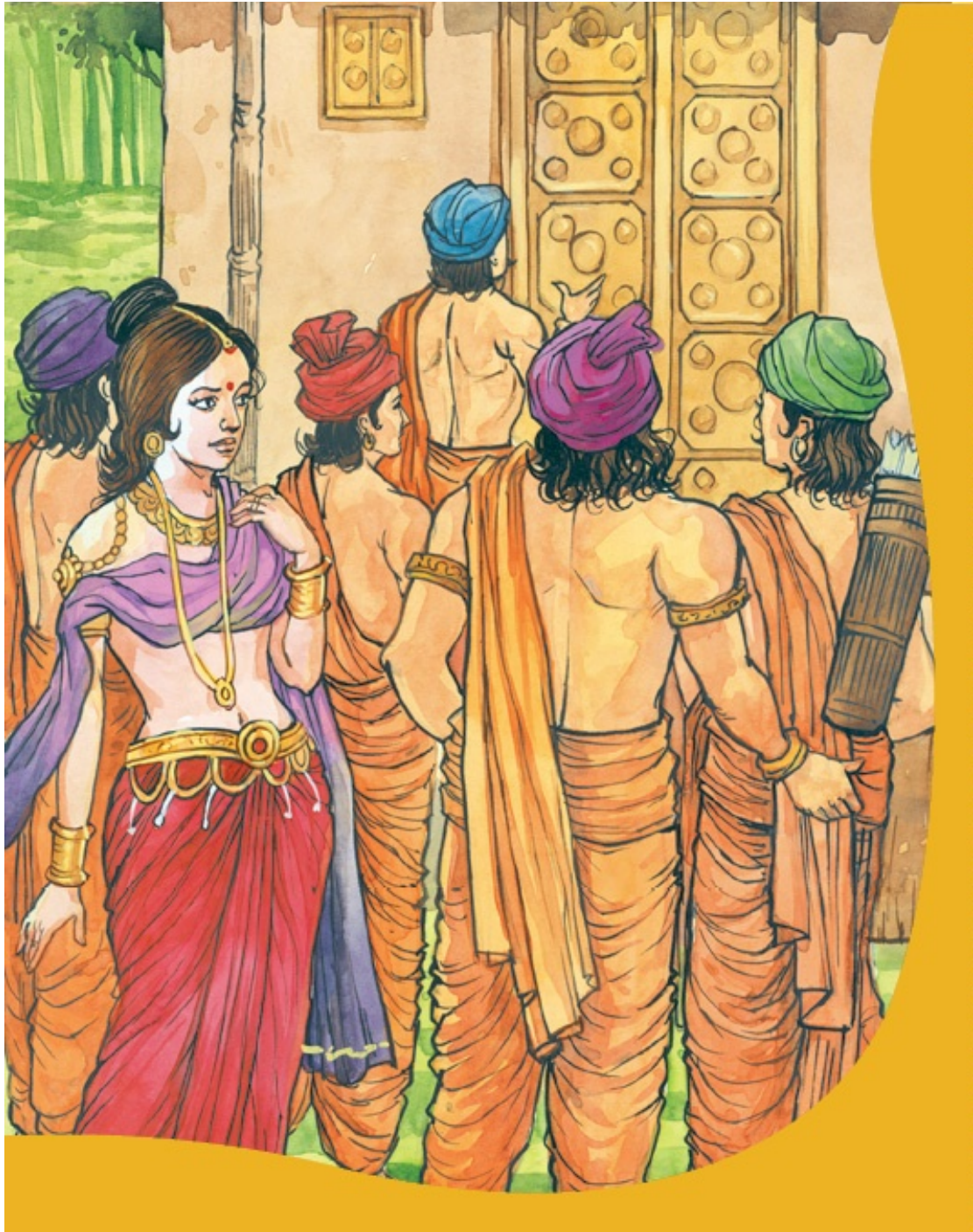
“Bheem,” he said. “Yes. We Pandavas are alive.”

“So ‘Mother’ is...”

“Queen Kunti,” Arjun said. “You won’t have to live as a poor mendicant’s wife when we go home to Hastinapur.” He laughed.

She ducked her head. “I wouldn’t mind if I did.” *Krishna was right*, she thought. He’d said that Arjun would come for her. He’d said that he was in Arjun and that Arjun was in him. This was her destiny.

“So about that prank,” Arjun continued, as if the secrets of the world had not just been revealed to her. “We’ll hide the princess behind us and tell Mother that we’ve been given wonderful alms today. And then we’ll present the princess. Can you imagine the look of shock on Mother’s face? It’ll be so funny!”



"I don't know..." Bheem said.

"Oh, don't be a spoilsport, Brother!"

"Only if the princess says it's alright," Bheem insisted.

"What do you think, Panchali?" Arjun asked, calling her lady of Panchal. He leaned down to look closely at her face.

She blushed again. "Whatever you say."

They arrived at the potters' house and went to the back entrance where Kunti was. Bheem peered through the window and saw their mother occupied at the stove. Arjun pushed open the back door.

"Mother, we've brought wonderful alms!"

Kunti didn't look towards them. "Share equally with your brothers."

Arjun and Bheem froze. After a moment they moved apart and looked at Draupadi. She blinked up at them, wondering what was happening.

Kunti finally looked towards the door and saw Draupadi standing there. She smiled. "Who is this?" she asked her sons, coming towards them.

"The Princess of Panchal," Arjun answered.

"Arjun won her hand at the *swayamvar*," Bheem said.

Kunti gasped. "How wonderful!" she reached forward and clasped Draupadi's beautiful face. "May the Almighty grant you good fortune, my daughter!" she blessed.

Draupadi bent to touch Kunti's feet. Kunti lifted her and kissed her forehead. "May you be ever happy with your husband!"

"But, Mother," Arjun said. "You told me to share her with my brothers."

"Share her?" came Yudhishtir's voice. He walked up with Dhaumya, Nakul and Sahadev with him. "What are you talking about?"

Kunti was looking at Arjun as if he was daft. "Share her? I told you to share alms..." she glared at him, realizing what had happened. "You referred to your wife as alms? Alms! How dare you, Arjun?"

Arjun hung his head.

"And you, Bheem!" Kunti said. "You didn't stop him?"

"Did you look when he said it?" Yudhishtir asked her.

"I-" she stopped, flushing. "No. I was looking at the stove when I said to share equally with his brothers. Oh no," she said, going pale. "Speech is a form of the Almighty. Untrue words may not be spoken. Oh no!"

Draupadi stood helplessly, not knowing what was happening.

"How can you all share her?" Kunti asked. "What does dharma say, Yudhishtir?"

"Arjun has won her." Yudhishtir said. "He should marry her."

"But what of my words?" Kunti asked.

Yudhishtir's gaze went to Draupadi then flickered away. He ached whenever he looked at her, having fallen in love with Krishnaa at first sight. *How can I feel this way?* Yudhishtir wondered. Arjun had won her. Yudhishtir had never in his life coveted what belonged to someone else. So why did he love her? Unless...

He looked at each of his younger brothers and saw in their faces what he himself was feeling. They were all stricken with longing for the daughter of fire. If she was Arjun's wife alone, the brothers would be divided. It would destroy the Pandavas.

Perhaps there was a reason that his mother had spoken these words? Yudhishtir searched his memory for examples of history that could help them. "There have been brothers before us who shared a wife," he said. "The lady Jatila married seven sages. And the ten Pracheta brothers married the same lady."

"So we let her marry all of you?" Kunti asked, bewildered. "But how can that be right? The poor child, she will suffer from malicious gossip!"

Dhaumya was standing to the side, observing all of them. "Perhaps we should let Krishna explain," he said.

"Krishna? Krishna!" Kunti said, catching sight of her nephew beyond the door.

Bheem, Arjun, and Draupadi turned to stare at Krishna. They'd not known he was following them.

"Oh Krishna," Kunti said, running to him. "How I've longed to see you!"

"Beloved Aunt," Krishna said, kneeling to touch her feet.

"We're in a dilemma," she told him as he rose.

“Have none of you asked the lady herself?” he asked. “She might tell you of her past life, when she asked for a boon from Lord Shiv.”

Everyone turned to Draupadi, who stood between them all. Hearing Krishna’s words, she blinked, remembering what he spoke of. She blushed again.

“She asked Lord Shiv for a husband who was the epitome of dharma, a husband who was the strongest in arms, a husband who was the greatest archer, a husband who was the most beautiful man, and a husband who was the most knowledgeable. Lord Shiv told her that all those qualities could not be found in one man but she insisted on having her wish. He relented and said that in her next life she would have five husbands. She said she only wanted one husband and he explained that she would have one husband in five forms. So today, you five Pandavas represent his boon. Sage Vyas himself tells of this story.”

The Pandavas looked at each other, hope dawning on their faces.

“Krishnaa?” Krishna asked her. “Is what I say true?” She nodded, her lotus eyes glancing up at each brother.

“There is more,” Krishna said to the Pandavas. “Just as you brothers are one man in five bodies, Krishnaa is five ladies in one body. She is *Devi Shree* herself, descended to rid the world of evil. She may take any form she desires and therefore will be a separate wife to each of you. Take her hand and return to Hastinapur. United with Panchali, your glory shall only increase.”

Kunti looked at her sons and saw that they were convinced. Draupadi also was willing. This unusual marriage would benefit all.

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा
न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥

*vāsānsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya
navāni gr̥hṇāti naro 'parāṇi
tathā śharīrāṇi vihāya jīmānya
nyāni sanyāti navāni dehī*

As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.

Bhagavad Gita 2.22



32. Hastinapur Divided

Drupad had sent Dhrishtadyuma to follow his sister, worried for Draupadi's safety.

Dhrishtadyumna hid behind the potters' hut and heard all the discussion among the Pandavas and Kunti and Krishna. Dhrishtadyumna then returned to his father. "They're not mendicants," he told Drupad. "They're the Pandavas! The man who won my sister is Arjun!"

Drupad was ecstatic to hear this but when he heard that the Pandavas all planned to marry Draupadi, he was outraged. That was when Sage Vyas appeared at Drupad's palace and explained to Drupad the mystery of Draupadi's past lives. "It is Lord Shiv's boon to this particular lady," Vyas said, "and the Lord's boon is always fruitful."

King Drupad was filled with wonder at this news.

Vyas was not finished. "In their past lives, each of these Pandava brothers reigned as Indra. Having angered Lord Shiv, these five Indras were cursed to live on earth as humans, fulfilling righteous deeds to make up for their mistakes. Out of compassion and in knowledge of her own wish, Lord Shiv granted them a boon that *Devi Shree* would aid them as their wife. She is born as your daughter Draupadi, destined to marry the five Pandavas, the five

Indras born on earth.”

Drupad could no longer doubt his daughter’s marriage. Calling Sage Dhaumya to aid his own priest, the king of Panchal gave Draupadi’s hand first to Yudhishtir, then Bheem, then Arjun, then Nakul, and lastly to Sahadev. To each bridegroom he gave immense wealth; jewels, gold, silver, garments, chariots, elephants, horses, and cows. Draupadi went to her husbands with thousands of maidens to serve her and many luxuries to grace her abode.

Krishna gave Draupadi many gifts also in the form of expensive garments, costly gems, wagons and chariots, finely woven blankets and sheets, beds and sofas and chairs and tables, and other furnishings. He gave the Pandavas elephants and horses and gold coins.

The celestial sage Narad visited Panchal shortly after the wedding and gave the Pandavas a marriage rule particular to their family. He proposed that Draupadi live each year in privacy with one husband. Any of the brothers who interrupted Draupadi’s privacy with her husband during that time should go into exile for twelve years. The Pandavas all agreed as did Draupadi and thus they lived their married life with this discipline.

It was now well known to the whole of Bharat that the Pandavas were alive, along with Kunti, and had allied with Draupadi as wife between them. Yudhishtir sent a message to his Elder Father Dhritarashtra.

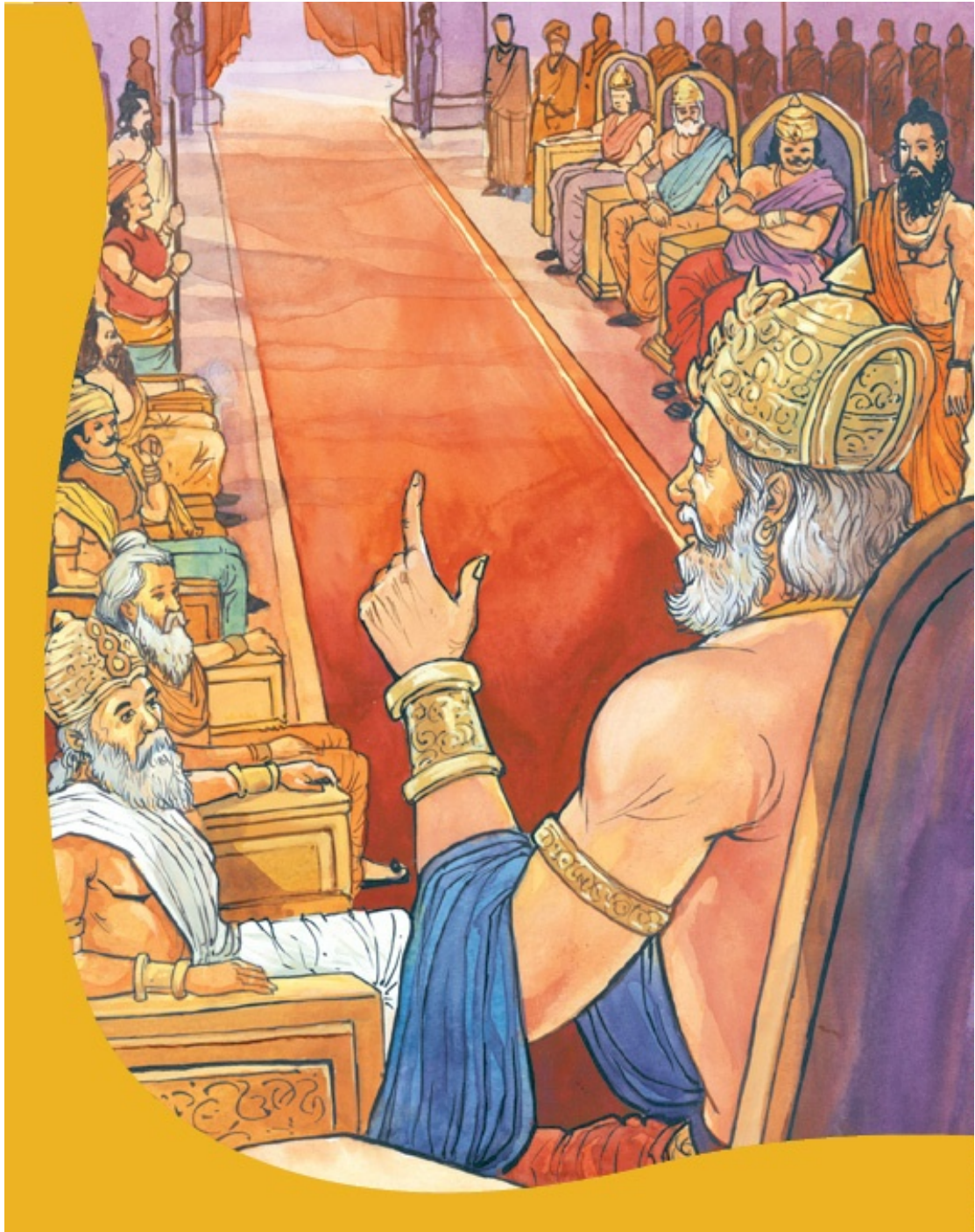
Dhritarashtra was disturbed to hear the news. Now the people would know that there had been a conspiracy at Varnavat!

Gandhari, however, was delighted that the Pandavas were alive. Ever since receiving the news of their death she’d mourned them. Somehow, she’d felt that her sons were responsible for the Pandavas’ death but now it turned out her nephews were alive and that weighty burden was lifted from her conscience.

The elders—Bheeshma, Dronacharya, Kripacharya, and Vidur—were overjoyed to hear the news. And the Pandavas were not just alive but married to the most famous princess of the land! The Pandavas’ father-in-law was the powerful king Drupad. The elders advised Dhritarashtra to call the Pandavas home and Gandhari echoed their wish. The people demanded it.

Dhritarashtra gritted his teeth. They were right. It was the only way to cover up Duryodhan's plot. The Kauravas had to act delighted that the Pandavas were not dead.

He sent an escort for them and the new daughter-in-law of the Bharat clan. The people of Hastinapur were very impressed with this princess. She was so enchanting that she had married all five brothers and yet they were never jealous of each other.



Draupadi was welcomed into the palace by Gandhari and all the royal ladies. The best apartments were decorated as her bridal suite and music was played there all day and night for her pleasure.

The Pandavas and Kunti were pleased that Draupadi was welcomed as daughter-in-law because soon she would be queen of Hastinapur. But that was the problem. Duryodhan was crown prince the same as Yudhishtir. How could a nation have two crown princes?

Gandhari knew her son Duryodhan would be disappointed but his desires were small compared to the needs of the people. Justice must be done, she told her husband.

Dhritarashtra talked to each of his advisors, looking for someone who would give him a way to deny Yudhishtir the throne.

Bheeshma knew that Dhritarashtra would do anything to give Hastinapur to Duryodhan. It broke Bheeshma's heart because while he himself had made solemn vows to protect his motherland, here was Dhritarashtra tearing her apart. Whispers of civil war arose and Bheeshma went cold when he heard them. There had to be a way for peace to prevail. "Divide the kingdom," he said to Dhritarashtra as he sat with all the elders.

"What?" Dhritarashtra asked in disbelief.

Bheeshma clenched his hands, a knot in his throat. "Give the Pandavas half the kingdom and keep the other half for Duryodhan. That is the only way peace can be maintained." Unable to bear it, Bheeshma left the palace and wandered the riverbank, seeking solace from his mother Ganga.

Drona and Kripa agreed with Bheeshma. Vidur told the king that it was his decision.

Dhritarashtra announced in the court of Hastinapur that half of the kingdom, the territory known as Khandav Prastha, would be gifted to the Pandavas for them to rule independently. Duryodhan, meanwhile, would remain in Hastinapur to inherit the capital after Dhritarashtra retired.

It was blatant corruption, the people knew. The king gave the Pandavas the barren swamp land of Khandav Prastha while keeping Hastinapur and all her wealth for Duryodhan! Their blind king was blind in every way, the people concluded. He didn't see his people. He didn't see justice. All he could see was his evil son Duryodhan.

Yudhishtir understood this also. He knew what Elder Father was doing yet Yudhishtir didn't want civil war in his motherland. He accepted the nation's partition and even agreed to Khandav Prastha.

The younger Pandavas were furious. "Why should we leave Hastinapur?"

Bheem asked. "Haven't we lived in exile for long enough?"

Krishna had accompanied them all to Hastinapur. "You are now set on a course," he told them. "It will be your duty to use your skills to make Khandav Prastha successful."

They were overwhelmed, thinking of all the back-breaking work ahead.

"Are you afraid of hard work, then?" Krishna asked them and they paused, frowning.

"We're not afraid," Yudhishtir said, watching his brothers.

"How can we be afraid when you are with us, Krishna?" Kunti said.

Krishna smiled at her. "Good, because I'm always with you, Aunt. Dhritarashtra thinks he has exiled your sons but instead, he has given them the opportunity to shine even more than their ancestors."

The Pandavas watched him in wonder.

"Dhritarashtra," Krishna concluded, "has granted you the land of your *karm*."



33. Mother's Advice

Bheeshma came to the riverbank to see his mother, as he did almost everyday. The moment she appeared he bowed and sighed heavily. "I don't know how long I can take this, Mother."

"Take what, my son?"

"This torture. Dhritarashtra doesn't care about anyone but Duryodhan anymore. Instead of giving justice, he just gives and gives to Duryodhan. Now the kingdom will be divided and I am torn in two!"

Ganga stepped out of the river and came to Bheeshma. She embraced him. "There there, my dear. Dark times pass as the night melds into day."

"This won't," he said, pulling away. "The Supreme Lord, Krishna himself, is here in Hastinapur and still Dhritarashtra does this. How is there to be safety for the kingdom if the Bharat clan is divided? How am I to ensure that my vow to my father is fulfilled? How will I be able to die in peace if I know that Hastinapur isn't safe?"

A frown marred Ganga's soft brow. "There is no way to persuade Dhritarashtra to take the path of dharma?"

"None." Bheeshma squeezed his eyes shut in frustration.

“You raised him. He’s like your son. You cannot order him to cease his greed?”

“I cannot. He is king. I vowed to serve whoever was king as if they were my own father. But Dhritarashtra is nothing like my father. I’ve always known that he was wounded by Satyawati choosing Pandu as king but I never thought he would take his wounds this far.” Bheeshma ran his hands through his hair, as if to pull it out.

Ganga made him sit on the grassy riverbank. She told him to breathe as the river flowed gently before them. “Have faith in Krishna for he is the Almighty and he is all that is certain in this world, my son,” Ganga sat next to him. “We do not have control over anyone’s actions but our own. Even our children surprise us, as Dhritarashtra has surprised you.”



Bheeshma tugged at his beard, the silver hairs getting stuck in his breastplate. His hair had long turned silver, while his *Devi* mother who sat next to him was just as youthful as the day she'd married his father. Her hair was black, her creamy skin smooth, and her pure white robes soft and modest. Then something she'd said caught his thoughts. "When did I ever surprise you?" he asked her.

She blinked at him. "When? *When?*" She heaved an exasperated breath. "You

speak of your vows in every sentence but do you not think I was surprised to find that you'd vowed away your kingdom? That you'd vowed lifelong celibacy?" She shook her head. "My Devavrat suddenly became Bheeshma and you think that didn't surprise me?" She stared at him. "I wasn't shocked by your devotion to your father or by your selflessness." She gave a bitter laugh. "I was shocked that you made such a momentous decision without *even once* asking my advice."

Bheeshma was open-mouthed, having never considered what his mother thought of his actions. He'd never imagined that she would be displeased. "I-I- there was no time-

"No time?" she snapped. "There was time to go camping and riding but no time to ask your mother if you should vow your life away?"

He was stunned. She was truly furious with him.

"You come to me every day and complain about Dhritarashtra and Duryodhan. It never seems to occur to you that none of this would be happening if you'd not taken your vows."

"It does occur to me," he said. "That is why it's such torture."

"So you come to me now to whine and complain but didn't bother coming to me years ago when it would have made a difference?"

Bheeshma was dumbfounded. His mother had never shown such anger to him before. But clearly she'd been furious with him for years. She was right that his actions had led to this situation in Hastinapur and yet he was behaving like a spoiled child, running to his mother at any sign of trouble. Bheeshma stood.

"Forgive me, Mother. I didn't mean to so offend you. I am guilty. I won't return here until you call me yourself." He turned and walked away, back to the palace.

Immediate concern eclipsed the anger in Ganga's eyes. "Devavrat," she said, but he was already gone.

At the palace, the Pandavas were ready to leave for Khandav Prastha. They awaited their mother in Yudhishtir's chamber.

Kunti arrived from her quarters, bringing Draupadi with her from the bridal suite. The two ladies carried *puja* plates, loaded with lighted lamps and flowers and vermillion powder. Kunti performed the *arati* around Draupadi and each of her husbands so that they would be successful in this first day of their new life.

They all kneeled and touched Kunti's feet. "Mother, bless us," they said in unison.

She raised her hands and blessed them all, showering them with love. "May you be ever victorious."

Yudhishthir rose. "What shall we do when we reach our destination, Mother?"

She caressed his cheek. "Krishna goes with you on this journey. You must have faith in him for he is all that is certain in this world. Follow his direction and all shall be well."

The tension eased from Yudhishthir's face and his eyes lightened. "All shall be well?"

She nodded. "Krishna is with you. That is all you need to be successful."

They rose. Draupadi glowed with excitement. "Elder Mother said she would await us at the palace entrance," she said. "We must not keep her waiting."

"Yes, seek Gandhari's blessings," Kunti said. "A mother's love is like an ocean. She will always pray for your victory."

The Pandavas and their servants made their way to the palace entrance where they bowed before Mother Gandhari. She blessed them with fame and glory and long life. She blessed Draupadi with many children and good fortune.

Draupadi's wedding gifts were packed and awaiting them in wagons and carts. There were furnishings and garments and all manner of household articles. Krishna and Balaram stood next to the wagons.

Krishna looked up, his lotus eyes bright in the rising dawn. "There they are," he said, speaking of the Pandavas. "The heroes arrive to take their place in the world." The Pandavas laughed as Krishna clapped them on their backs. Draupadi came slowly down the steps in her bridal finery and Krishna smiled

at her. "For you, my dear Krishnaa," he said, "I have brought special gifts. Such fine garments and jewels fit for your beauty. And I have brought many maids to serve you."

She glanced down shyly. "You are the greatest gift of all, Giridhar," she said.

The Pandavas nodded. "We're so glad you're with us, Krishna," Yudhishtir said.

Krishna put his hand on Yudhishtir's shoulder. "I'm not the only one who is with you." Together, he led them all to the gates of the paved courtyard. "See who is beyond."

The Pandavas pushed the gates open. An ocean of people stood there, the crowd going back as far as they would see. They were merchants and farmers and warriors and Pundits, all waiting with their worldly possessions.

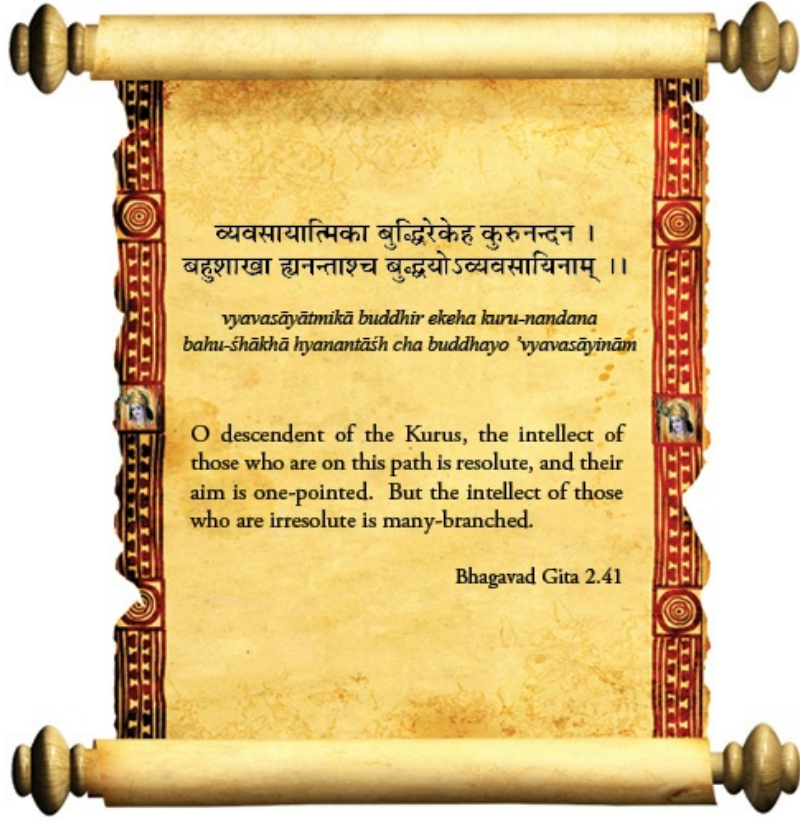
Yudhishtir looked upon his people, citizens of his motherland who believed in him so much that they were ready to leave Hastinapur and walk behind him. He reached out and clutched Draupadi's hand.

"They are with you as I am with you," Krishna said quietly.

They are with us because you are with us, Yudhishtir thought. *Mother was right.*

The elders arrived and there were many blessings and farewells. Bheeshma hugged Arjun and Arjun saw tears in his beloved grandsire's eyes.

Sage Dhaumya performed the prayers and then the royal party ascended their chariots. The conch shell was blown and the Pandavas and Draupadi rode with Krishna to their new land.



व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिरेकेह कुरुनन्दन ।
बहुशाखा ह्यनन्ताश्च बुद्ध्योऽव्यवसायिनाम् ॥

*vyavasāyātmikā buddhir ekeha kuru-nandana
bahu-śākhā hyanantāśh cha buddhayo 'vyavasāyinām*

O descendent of the Kurus, the intellect of those who are on this path is resolute, and their aim is one-pointed. But the intellect of those who are irresolute is many-branched.

Bhagavad Gita 2.41



34. Indraprastha

While their followers camped in a makeshift village that Draupadi managed, the Pandavas set about organizing Khandav Prastha.

Krishna drew up a plan of action.

They cleared the boggy marshlands and the brush that hid all manner of poisonous things. Arjun skillfully employed his divine arrows, gifted by Drona, to bring rain or make fire, clearing the land so that it could grow bountiful.

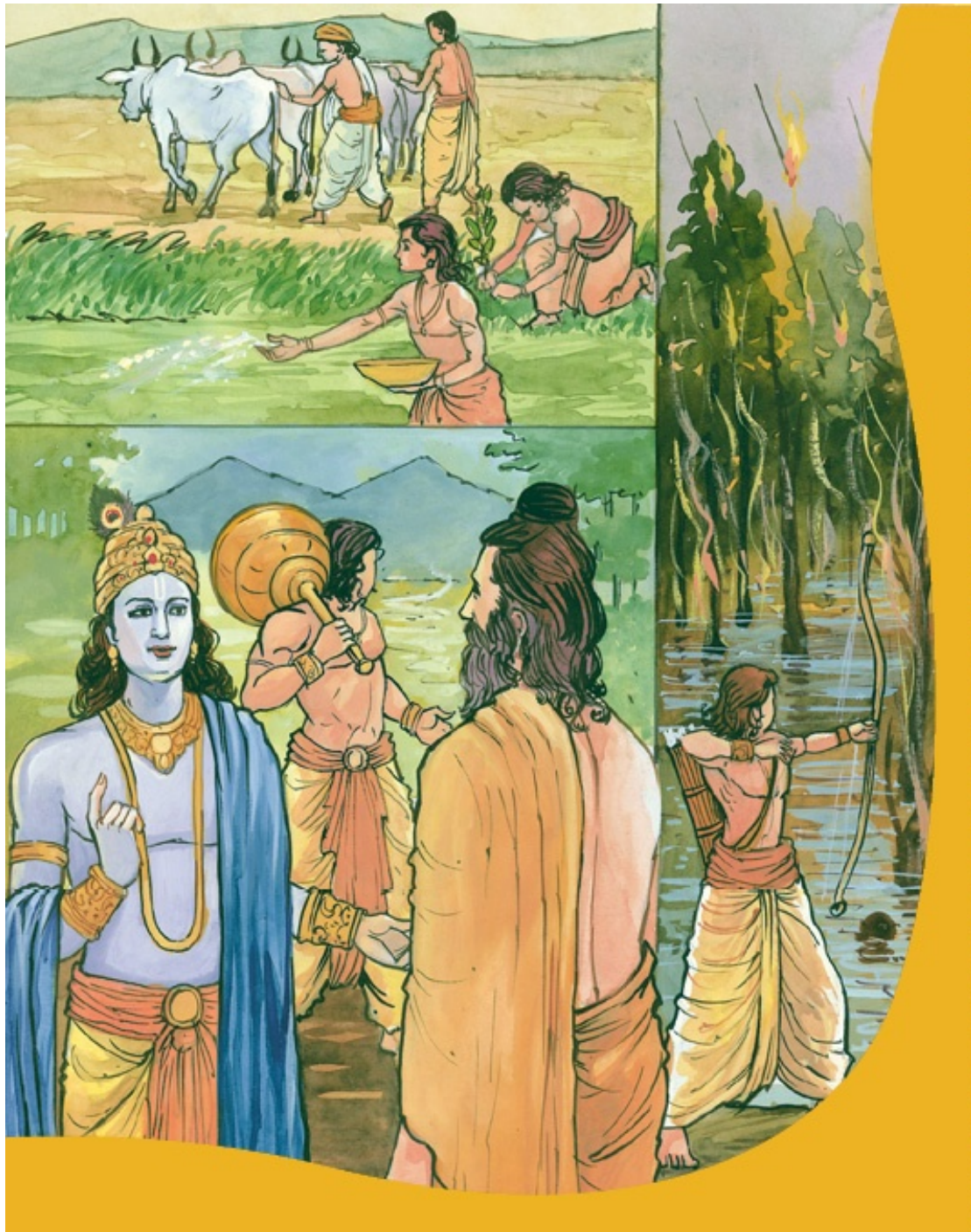
Using Sahadev and Nakul's expertise in animals and agriculture, they managed the wildlife they found and the cattle they brought, creating a balance of domestic and wild nature. Bheem employed his strength to dig canals so water could flow, irrigating the new fields.

Balaram used his favorite plough to seed the fields, with Yudhishtir leading the bulls over the miles and miles of land. They planted wheat, barley, millet, beans, flax. Nakul and Sahadev planted lentils between the grain fields so the earth would not be overused from the same crop.

Some marshes they left wild to maintain the wildlife and its beauty, while other areas they tamed for human habitation. They created ponds and lakes

filled with clean rain water to ensure that the river system was not strained from the crops. The rivers were allowed to flow freely, granting life all along Bharat and not just in their own kingdom.

Vyas arrived and Krishna consulted with him. Together, they selected a place that would be cleared for building a city. Dhaumya performed the ceremony to worship the land, and the Pandavas erected high white walls with numerous gates, each gate adorned with panels carved like the wings of Garuda. The walls were surrounded by a deep moat, wide as a lake, to create a fortified structure that could withstand any siege. And within those walls they built broad paved streets, palatial mansions and gigantic civic halls. They made gardens that bore numerous fruit and nut trees, parks with fragrant flowers and nutritious vegetables, and all manner of natural wonders. Honeybees were nurtured in different corners of the city and there were numerous markets places and torches that lit every street at night. An underground sewer system managed the waste of the city so that it flowed back into the fields and fertilized the crops.



The Pandavas built their royal palace on the highest elevated point of the city, with stone that was the color of lightning clouds. Each brother had his own mansion, with Draupadi's quarters in the center and Kunti's house close by.

Yudhishthira then managed the transfer of their people from the camp to the city, spreading out the numbers and organizing the different communities. Their artists and craftsmen created great sculptures and fountains that dotted the city, and pleasure houses of art and dance were numerous. Temples were

made to bring the people spiritual welfare and Pundits set up their *ashrams* in the parks and natural places, creating serenity and energy with their *yajnas* and mantras and yog.

The merchants set up their shops on the busy streets and the farmers took charge of the fields under Sahadev and Nakul's guidance. Arjun trained and commanded the warriors and Bheem saw to the defensive strategy of the city and their borders. Yudhishtir and Krishna consulted with the Pundits and set up laws for the peaceful maintenance of the kingdom.

The city was so beautiful and prosperous that the people no longer called it Khandav Prastha that had been barren and ugly. They called it Indraprastha, the city of Indra. Its fame spread. Immigrants came from distant lands and Yudhishtir welcomed them with open arms. He granted lands, homes, and jobs, and they produced wealth that all shared in, making the kingdom even more prosperous. Towns and villages were created beyond the city itself, through the vast reclaimed desert that had been Khandav Prastha.

Seeing that the Pandavas were now well settled, Krishna and Balaram bid them all farewell. With heavy hearts the Pandavas let them go, and continued the task of ruling Indraprastha in Krishna's absence.

Every citizen paid taxes according to their means but never more than their means. Every person had a job and a home, and all women were protected even if they had no husband or father. No children were considered orphans in Yudhishtir's kingdom. The sick were cared for. No one was vulnerable or poor. As a result there was no crime in the streets. The people lived in shared prosperity, without fear of being robbed or taken advantage of.

Draupadi managed the royal palace and gardens with expertise. She was always busy taking care of guests and Pundits and diplomats from far away nations. Many kings sent their messengers to make treaties and trade alliances with Indraprastha and Yudhishtir consulted with Dhaumya on what was best for his people and for their land. He made friendships with smaller kingdoms and alliances with large kingdoms.

Any threat from hostile kings, Dhaumya advised, was best averted with trade agreements and diplomacy, and if neither worked to protect his people, only then was a king justified in making war. Yudhishtir listened to his counsel

closely and was committed to safeguarding his nation. Still, there were many lands ruled by corrupt kings and he worried about how to ensure his people's safety.

All the people praised King Yudhishtir for his excellent management of Indraprastha. Draupadi beside him outshone all other queens and together they made a paradise on earth, with the younger Pandavas making their vision real.

Great sages came to Indraprastha to bless the Pandavas and the Pandavas showed their gratitude in large charity and protection of the sages' *ashrams*. Bheem organized guards on the roads to ensure that every traveler was safe under King Yudhishtir's protection. Arjun patrolled their borders with vigilant soldiers, ensuring that their subjects were always at peace.

Then one day, as Arjun was in the front courtyard of the palace, a Pundit came weeping to their front gates. Shocked, Arjun ran to him.

"My cows have been stolen!" the Pundit cried. "Robbers took them! How will I perform *yajnas* without my cows to give milk and butter?"

Robbers! In Indraprastha? Arjun wondered. "Do not fear, Pundit lord. I will pursue these thieves and bring back your cows." He asked more questions to find out where the robbers were headed and then rushed to the room where the Pandavas kept their weapons.

The door was closed. The guard informed Arjun that the king and queen were inside.

Arjun remembered their rule that no brother was allowed to break Draupadi's privacy with her husband for that year. If any brother broke that rule then he would have to go into exile for twelve years in the forest. But the Pundit was being robbed, Arjun thought. If he did not defend the Pundit then Yudhishtir's kingdom would be defamed and crime would thrive. Arjun pushed open the door.

Yudhishtir and Draupadi looked up in shock and Arjun bowed to the king, asking pardon. Arjun took his weapons and chased after the robbers, catching them and binding their hands to bring them back for trial. He took the cows unhurt to the Pundit.

Returning to the palace, Arjun saw Yudhishtir waiting for him. "I must go into exile," Arjun said.

Yudhishtir's face clouded. "No, no! I know you only meant to help the Pundit."

"We made a rule," Arjun said, helpless. "We cannot break it."

Yudhishtir sighed. "Make ready then. But before you leave come and see me."

Arjun removed his royal clothing and dressed in simple cotton. He said farewell to Draupadi. She was distraught but knew he must fulfill his vow. She told him that she would perform austerities until he returned to her. Arjun went to see his mother who blessed him that his twelve years would be safe and fruitful. Arjun then went to see Yudhishtir and found all four of his brothers awaiting him. They closed the door against other ears.

"Your exile can be to advantage for our people," Yudhishtir said. Arjun listened as his brothers listed all the lands and nations they needed alliances with, kingdoms that were allied with Duryodhan. "We must remove all threat of attack," Yudhishtir said.



35. Bhakti comes to Indraprastha

Arjun traveled from nation to nation, learning the ways of these rulers. Living as a simple exile with vows of fasting and meditation, he made friendships with those kings and persuaded them to make Yudhishtir their ally. In this way, he brought many kingdoms into alliance with Indraprastha.

After years of his exile, he went to Dwaraka. It had been so long and now finally he would see the Lord again.

When Krishna heard that Arjun had come, he ran to greet Arjun in the street. Laughing, hugging with affection, the two of them walked towards the palaces as Krishna pointed out the delights of Dwaraka. There was art, and music, and dance performances, and beautiful gardens.

“And there”, he said, pointing to some young ladies playing in a garden, “there is my sister.”

Arjun was about to ask which one but then he spotted her. She was delicately formed and fair-skinned. She looked nothing like Krishna except for her charming smile. Arjun chuckled. “She’s lovely.”

“Yes, she is,” Krishna said proudly.

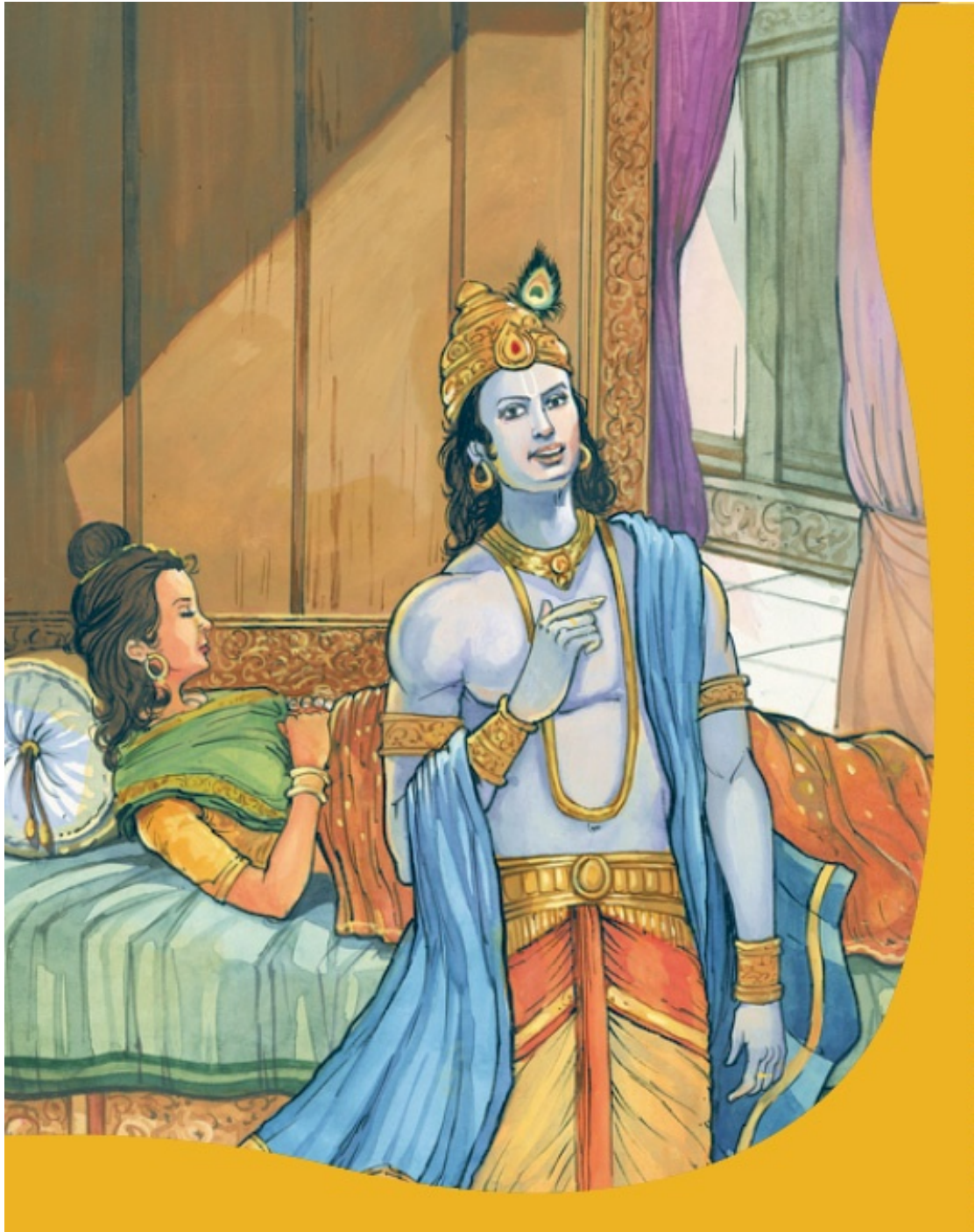
Krishna installed Arjun close to him in the royal palace and sent his own

clothes for Arjun to wear. Subhadra, in charge of the maids who delivered the clothes, blushed when she saw Arjun. "Everything is to your satisfaction?" she asked, her voice innocent.

"Yes, Princess, everything is perfect."

"I'm glad. Please tell me if there's anything you need."

Arjun spent the days reveling in the luxury of Krishna's beautiful city. Devaki, Vasudev, and Rohini all took delight in talking to him and Balaram drove with him around the city, showing him the sights. Subhadra served him his food and Arjun teased her every time simply for the pleasure of watching her blush.



Most of his time was spent with Krishna, who asked about all the things he'd done in exile. Krishna approved of the alliances he'd made. "There is always a way to serve society, even when obstacles occur," Krishna said.

"And how may I serve you, Krishna?" Arjun asked. "Every day I ask this question."

Krishna patted Arjun on the shoulder. "I am served wherever there is *bhakti*. My sister Subhadra will tell you how happy it makes me to see love and

devotion in the world.”

“She’s very devoted to you.”

“She is devotion,” Krishna said. “She is *Bhakti* herself. I would see her happily settled with a worthy husband but I worry.”

“Why?”

“Because Duryodhan has asked for her hand in marriage.”

Arjun went still.

Krishna explained. “Elder Brother Balaram is friendly with Duryodhan ever since Duryodhan came here to study mace fighting from him. He has granted Duryodhan’s wish and is telling Subhadra to accept him. If she has a *swayamvar* – for appearances – there’s no telling what she’ll do in desperation.”

Arjun was open-mouthed with horror.

“She’s very fond of you, you know,” Krishna said suddenly.

Arjun blinked. “She is?”

“Yes. She’d hate to be married to Duryodhan.”

Arjun was distressed at the very thought of her being anywhere near his evil cousin. How to save her from this awful marriage? How could he argue with the great Balaram?

“She will soon go with her maids to Mother Durga’s temple. It’s in the forest. Balaram won’t be anywhere nearby. Perhaps you should go to the temple also. Perhaps...then you should leave Dwaraka.”

Arjun stared at Krishna. *Is he saying what I think he’s saying?* Arjun thought

“She’s very fond of you,” Krishna repeated.

Arjun raised his hands. “I’ll have to ask Elder Brother’s permission before taking such a step.” Krishna agreed that they would send a messenger and laid out plans for how Arjun and Subhadra would leave the island city of Dwaraka when Yudhishtir’s permission arrived.

Arjun was about to rise when Krishna spoke again. "Just remember that when you ride away, you let Subhadra drive the chariot." Arjun was confused but nodded. Krishna always knew what he was talking about, even if no one else did.

Yudhishtir gave permission to proceed with Krishna's plan. It was dharma to save a lady from an unwanted marriage. Arjun drove up to the temple on the appointed day and Subhadra came running out. He drew her onto his chariot and she took the reins. Laughing, she drove them to the port where Krishna's boat waited.

As Arjun glanced down at Subhadra driving their chariot, he thought of Krishna's departing words. "I don't thwart my own brother for no reason," Krishna had said. "Nor do I give Draupadi a rival wife for amusement's sake. This is not a game, Arjun. You and Subhadra have a future to build. Remember that when you see Krishnaa for both she and Subhadra are my dear ones."

When Balaram heard that Arjun had abducted Subhadra, he was enraged. He raised the might of the Yadu army to go after them and kill Arjun. Krishna saw his chance. "Did you not all stand with me when I rescued Rukmini from Shishupal?" he asked the warriors and they were silent. "Subhadra was being pressured to choose a certain prince at her *swayamvar* despite her own wishes. Perhaps she managed to tell Arjun of her distress. Perhaps Arjun abducted her to save her from this unwanted marriage. What right did we have, after all, to tell her who to choose?"

Balaram looked stricken at that statement. He turned his face away.

"I heard," Krishna said, "that when Arjun abducted her, Subhadra herself drove the chariot! Does that sound like an unwilling lady?" Krishna crossed his arms. "This marriage can only be good for our clan and our people. Our Subhadra is now united with the mighty Pandava Arjun of Indraprastha! We must hurry to bring them back here so we can perform their marriage ourselves. Otherwise, our clan will look very foolish indeed."

Krishna's words convinced the Yadus to make peace with Arjun. They went after the couple and brought them back to Dwaraka and performed the wedding with great pomp. Arjun and Subhadra lived in Dwaraka for a whole

year until finally traveling to Indraprastha.

Arjun went to Draupadi to explain but she was furious and hurt. She had married all five brothers yet Arjun had won her hand. Arjun was the one Krishna said was his other form. Draupadi could never show it but of course she loved Arjun the most! “You have weakened the bond between us,” she told Arjun. “I cannot even bear to look at you.”

Arjun was worried but he knew that if there was one person Draupadi loved as she loved him, it was Krishna. Arjun sent Subhadra to Draupadi’s quarters dressed as a milkmaid and told her to introduce herself as Krishna’s little sister.

Subhadra fell at Draupadi’s feet, asking to be her maid. Draupadi was startled to see Krishna’s charming smile in this lady’s expression. “Who are you?” Draupadi asked.

“Krishna calls me his little sister but he calls you his Krishnaa so you are much more special.”

Looking into Subhadra’s face, seeing Krishna, Draupadi’s heart melted and she knelt, embracing Subhadra on the floor. How could she be jealous of Krishna’s own beloved sister?

Krishna and Balaram and many from Dwaraka came to Indraprastha, bringing wedding gifts for their sister. Most from Dwaraka returned home soon after but Krishna remained in Indraprastha.

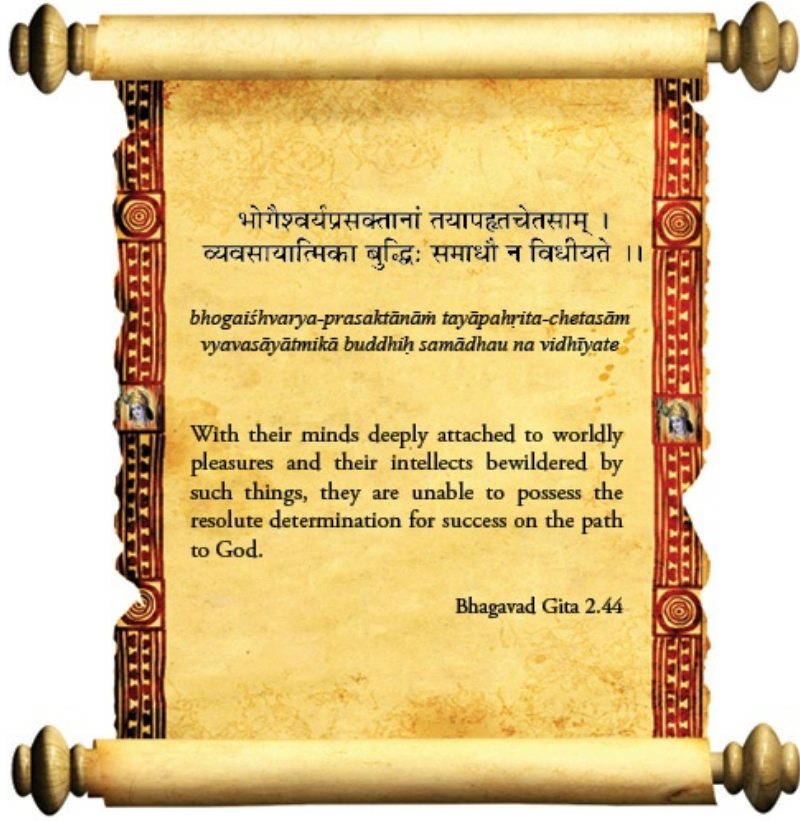
Subhadra became pregnant and she was very tired as her belly grew with the baby. Krishna would tell her stories to keep her from being bored. One day he distracted her by telling her battle strategies. He told her the secret of the *chakravyuh* formation, a very difficult battle tactic. Of all the warriors in the world, only Bheeshma, Drona, Arjun, and Krishna himself knew this secret. In her womb, her baby was listening. Krishna finished explaining how to break into the seven layers of the formation and was about to explain how to break out but he saw that Subhadra had fallen asleep. He covered her with a blanket and left the chamber.

Subhadra gave birth to a baby who roared like a fearless lion at his birth. As a result, he was named Abhimanyu.

Draupadi then gave birth to Yudhishtir's son, who was named Prativindhya because he was capable of bearing great weight like the Vindhya Mountains. Draupadi had five sons in total, one by each husband, and they were born a year between each other. Sutasoma, she bore for Bhishma after Bhishma had performed a thousand *Soma yajnas*. She gave Arjuna a son when he returned from his exile in which he had performed many virtuous deeds. Therefore, their son was named Shrutakarman. Draupadi's son with Nakul was named Shatanika after the great Bharata royal sage and her son with Sahadeva was named Shrutasena, after the constellation he was born under.

To celebrate their sons' births, King Yudhishtir gave away thousands of cows and many gold coins in charity to the Pundits. Sage Dhaumya performed the *puja* to initiate the sons into learning the Vedas and Krishna was present as uncle to bless them.

The Pandavas hoped that these children would be worthy heirs for their people.



भोगैश्वर्यप्रसक्तानां तयापहृतचेतसाम् ।
व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिः समाधौ न विधीयते ॥

*bhogaiśhvarya-prasaktānām tayāpahṛita-chetasām
vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ samādhau na vidhīyate*

With their minds deeply attached to worldly pleasures and their intellects bewildered by such things, they are unable to possess the resolute determination for success on the path to God.

Bhagavad Gita 2.44



36. Balance

The Pandavas and their family lived in wealth and luxury in Indraprastha. One day, Arjun and Krishna went to the riverbank by the Khandav forest with Draupadi and Subhadra. Many artists and musicians played music and danced and made them all laugh. They feasted and talked about the wonders of the world.

As they sat on costly soft fabric, leaning on the soft earth and eating delicate dishes, a holy man walked up to them. He had red eyes and golden hair that was tinged with green. His skin was tawny-colored and he glowed with an inner fire but he was very thin. Arjun and Draupadi rose in respect, wondering who this radiant sage was.

“I am Agni,” he told them and they realized that he wasn’t a holy man at all but a *devata*. Draupadi bowed and touched his feet for she had been born of the holy fire. This was her father. Agni blessed her and then proceeded to tell her, Arjun, and Krishna that he was starving because there’d been no fires on earth.

Confused, Arjun asked what he meant. Agni explained that for the balance of nature, there needed to be fires to vanquish the old and rotten and bring about the new and fresh. If he, Agni, was not fed then the earth would become

old and starving also, overburdened with too many life forms. "I must eat," Agni told Arjun.

Krishna agreed with him. The Pandavas had protected the forests from any fire but that was in fact hurting the very environment they were trying to protect. Agni needed to eat for the balance of nature.

Sending the ladies and all others to a safe distance, Arjun allowed Agni to create a fire in Khandav forest. It raged so hot that even Indra came to see it.

Many evil *rakshasas*, *asuras*, and *danavas* tried to flee the forest fire. Arjun realized that they'd taken shelter in Khandav, thinking that the Pandavas would never allow the forest to burn. As these foes tried to escape, he and Krishna destroyed them.

Krishna caught one particular *danav* and would have ended his life but Arjun saw the plea in his eyes. Arjun took pity and stopped Krishna from killing him.

The fire burned out and all the *devatas* were satisfied that the balance of nature was upheld. Indra and Agni then said to Arjun and Krishna that they would grant them both boons. Arjun asked for divine weapons and received the indestructible and undefeatable *gandiv* bow from Indra. Agni gave Arjun a mighty war chariot, swifter than even the wind.

Krishna, for his boon, asked that his friendship with Arjun would remain eternal. Indra, remembering that he himself had prayed to Krishna to always protect Arjun, was overjoyed by the Lord's love. He granted the boon and disappeared with Agni.

Arjun and Krishna remembered the *danav* who waited on the riverbank. They questioned him and he revealed that his name was Maya and that he was a great architect, the Vishwakarma of his people. He asked to serve Arjun in some way since Arjun had saved his life.

Arjun smiled. "If you wish to serve then serve Krishna for he is my Lord."

Maya bowed at Krishna's feet and Krishna commanded him to build a magnificent palace for King Yudhishtir, a palace such as the world had never seen. It should be a combination of human, *devata*, and *danav* designs and astonish all who beheld it.

Maya built a magical palace that shone like the sun in the sky. The floors looked like flowing water or blazing fire, and walls looked like forests or clouds. Each room had secret magic within it. On completion, Dhaumya performed the *puja* to purify the palace and the Pandava family lived there surrounded by luxury and magic.

Krishna returned home to Dwaraka and Rukmini.

In his absence, Kunti, Draupadi, and Subhadra were very sad, and the Pandavas tried to cheer and comfort them. Slowly, they all returned to the everyday work and pleasure of ruling Indraprastha, even though they missed Krishna.

One day, Sage Narad came to see Yudhishtir and he gave advice on the governance of the kingdom. He told the king how to prevent corruption while increasing efficiency, how to increase prosperity while decreasing greed. Yudhishtir was careful to employ the tactics Narad gave him. Narad then advised Yudhishtir to begin the task of performing the greatest of all *yajnas*, the *Rajsuya yajna*, for a king such as Yudhishtir was qualified to perform it. "Such a *yajna* creates peace on earth for the performer of the *yajna* becomes Emperor," Narad told Yudhishtir. "It is what your father, Pandu, desires."

Yudhishtir jerked. "My father?"

Narad nodded. "He and Madri are wandering in the realm of the dead. Because Pandu died of Sage Kindam's curse they cannot enter the celestial realm but when I saw him last, he bid me tell you to perform the *Rajsuya yajna*."

Yudhishtir was frozen on his throne. His virtuous father had not reached the celestial realm? He wandered with Mother Madri among the dead? "Great Sage," he whispered, unable to find words for his horror.

"I understand your pain, Great King," Narad said. "The *Rajsuya yajna* gives much merit to the ancestors of whoever performs it. Therefore, you can free both Pandu and Madri with this *yajna*. They will be able to live in the court of Indra."

Narad departed and Yudhishtir was left to contemplate performing the *Rajsuya*. He spoke to his brothers, to Draupadi, to Kunti. He spoke to

Dhaumya, Sage Vyas, and other *rishis*. They all agreed that he must do the *yajna* but because of the magnitude of the event—to become emperor—Yudhishthir could not decide on what to do. He wished to serve the world and dharma, not be greedy and name himself emperor.

Yet his father's plight went around and around his mind. Yudhishthir knew that there was only one person in the world who could help him make this decision. He wrote a letter to his Lord in Dwaraka, and Krishna, feeling the pain of his devotee, rushed to Indraprastha.



37. Jarasandh

Krishna sat in private with the Pandavas.

“You are the only king capable of being emperor,” Krishna told Yudhishtir, “because, like Bharat, you are the only one who won’t abuse your power. That is why you must perform the *Rajsuya*. But first you must gain the consent of all kings, and one will stand in your way. He is the most tyrannical ruler of all, and he is holding prisoner in his dungeons many kings. He controls their vast wealth and lands and must be stopped. He is Jarasandh of Magadh.”

“I know of him,” Yudhishtir said. “He is the one who forced your move to Dwaraka.”

“Yes, he caused much pain to Mathura. Since then he has been causing pain to all of Bharat and the rest of the world. Many nations lie under his oppression, afraid to resist for fear that he will kill their captive kings.”

“But how has he managed to do this?” Yudhishtir asked.

“He has performed many acts of austerity to Lord Shiv and the Lord was bound by those acts to give him boons of power. Jarasandh is not an ordinary person. The manner of his birth was particularly strange. His father, King Vrihadrath of Magadh, was given a mango by Sage Chanda-Kaushik.

Vrihadrath then gave the mango to his two queens who shared it by cutting the mango in half. They both gave birth to a child but each child had only half a body. Split down the middle, from head to toe. Frightened, the queens threw the bodies away into the forest and there passed a *rakshasi* named Jara. She found the two halves and put them together to eat. By the sage's grace, the two halves became one and the child gave a mighty roar that frightened Jara. The roar was heard by the king who rushed to find the baby. Because the child had been joined together by Jara, he was called Jarasandh and this is the secret of his great strength. He is not one, but two, and he is the result of a sage's blessing. Soon, he plans to sacrifice the lives of one hundred kings in honor of Lord Shiv and he has only fourteen kings left to capture. If he manages to perform such a horrific act then he will incur *tantric* power and will take over the entire earth. Great King, you must stop Jarasandh from sacrificing these kings and vanquish his evil once and for all."

"Krishna," Yudhishtir said, "you are my highest authority in everything. Yet when even you fled from Jarasandh, how can we Pandavas defeat him?"

"If we already think we're defeated then we can never win," Bheem interjected. "Any warrior may be defeated with strategy, strength, and conviction. Krishna has strategy, I have strength, and Arjun has conviction. We three will go to defeat him."

"How then is this deed to be completed?" Yudhishtir asked Krishna.

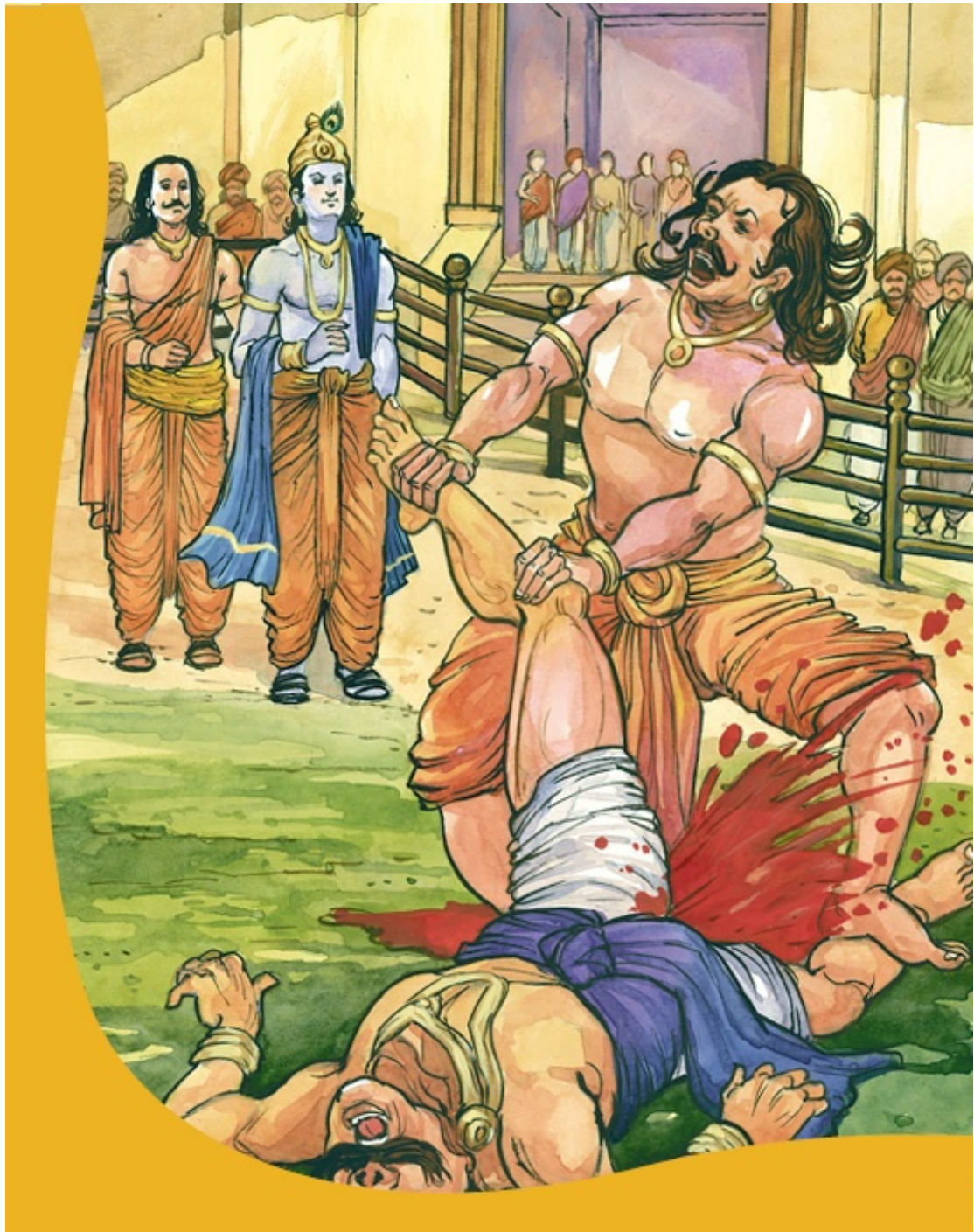
"Open battle would not achieve our purpose," Krishna said. "Jarasandh's army is vast and his cunning is great. However, he is not a coward and he has a lot of pride. If we were to challenge him to a duel, face-to-face, then he would not refuse."

"Then how do we get close enough to challenge him face-to-face?" Yudhishtir said.

Krishna smiled. "Despite his evil, he is a devotee of Lord Shiv and he respects sages greatly. We will disguise ourselves as Pundits and go to Magadh."

Yudhishtir thought of those hundred kings, of those nations held captive, of his father Pandu and mother Madri. He thought of all the earth seeking protection and nodded. "Go, then. Be victorious."

Krishna led them across Bharat in secret, in the guise of Pundits who had taken vows of austerity. They were welcomed into Magadh as Krishna had predicted and received in the king's own chamber. They sat on costly gold-threaded fabric and waited. When Jarasandh arrived to welcome them, however, he saw the marks of weapons training on their bodies. "Who are you?" he snarled. "And why do you sneak into my domain in this manner?"



“We’re your enemies,” Krishna said. “I’m Krishna, and these are the sons of Kunti, Bheem and Arjun.”

Jarasandh looked at Krishna, his lip curled with contempt. “Ah. You are the Ranchod who ran to Dwaraka to escape me.”

“And you are the Jarasandh I’ve defeated eighteen times in battle,” Krishna said simply. “We have come to liberate those kings you hold hostage and we challenge you to a duel.”

“We? The three of you against I alone?”

“No,” Krishna clarified. “One of us against you. You may choose which and you may even choose the manner of duel.”

“Hmph!” Jarasandh said. “As if I would duel a coward like you, Krishna! Nor will I chose this thin weak Arjun. Bheem will suit me. We will wrestle to the death.”

Krishna smiled. It was just as he’d expected.

Bheem and Jarasandh met in a dueling field the next day. The *devatas* watched from above and the serpent lords came out of the earth to watch from below. All of Jarasandh’s court surrounded them and the people of Magadh filled the stands of the dueling field. Krishna and Arjun stood to the side as Jarasandh refused to fall beneath Bheem’s mighty blows.

Bheem had fought *rakshasas*, he’d fought heroes, he’d fought some of the most frightening foes in the world. But Jarasandh was his most difficult opponent yet. Bheem panted and twisted, breaking Jarasandh’s hold on his neck.

When Jarasandh finally began to tire, Bheem grabbed one of Jarasandh’s legs and pressed his knee into the tyrant’s backbone. Bheem pulled Jarasandh’s body apart, splitting it from head to toe. He threw down the half he held and a deep silence surrounded them. Bheem looked at Krishna in relief. It was over!

Then something astonishing happened. Jarasandh’s body came back together. The sides just slid over the earth until they joined again, like drops of water that rolled together. Jarasandh lay on the dusty earth and laughed at Bheem, a look of cunning in his eyes. Bheem tore him apart again. The same thing happened. Bheem did it again. It happened again. Bheem looked to Krishna in desperation? Why wouldn’t this Jarasandh die?

Krishna kneeled and began searching the ground.

“What are you doing?” Arjun cried. “How do we help Bheem?”

Krishna ignored Arjun. He found a twig and picked it up. “Brother Bheem!”

Bheem had torn Jarasandh apart again. He looked over and as he watched,

Krishna pulled the twig in two and threw the halves on the opposite sides.

Jarasandh's body came back together but Bheem knew what to do now. He tore the tyrant apart and threw the left side of Jarasandh's body to the right, while throwing the right side of his body to the left. The halves stirred, trying to find each other, then stilled. Jarasandh was finally dead.

Covered in sweat and blood and dust, Bheem tilted his head up to the sky as *devatas* rained flowers upon him. The crowd roared with victory cries and Bheem staggered to Krishna and kneeled at his feet. "Thank you, Lord."

The vast and powerful land of Magadh now belonged to the Pandavas. They released the kings from imprisonment who all fell at Krishna's feet. "What may we do to serve you?" they asked.

"We desire only your friendship," Krishna told them. "You are all free now and so are your countries. With your friendship and permission, King Yudhishtir wishes to perform the *Rajsuya* so that dharma may prevail on earth."

"We agree! We agree!" they cried and embraced both Bheem and Arjun as brothers.

Jarasandh's son, Sahadev, came with all his family and kneeled before Bheem, Arjun, and Krishna. He announced the surrender of Magadh and all her allies. He laid the crown, the king's sword, and all the articles of leadership before them. "My father did many wicked things," he said, "but I pray you will not punish the innocent people of Magadh for his crimes. He oppressed them as much as anyone else."

Krishna helped Sahadev to his feet. "We came here to protect the innocent, not punish them. You, Sahadev, shall rule in Magadh now for we are not here to claim your kingdom. You are nothing like your father so rule and give dharma back to your people."

Krishna, Bheem, and Arjun returned to Indraprastha in a blaze of glory.

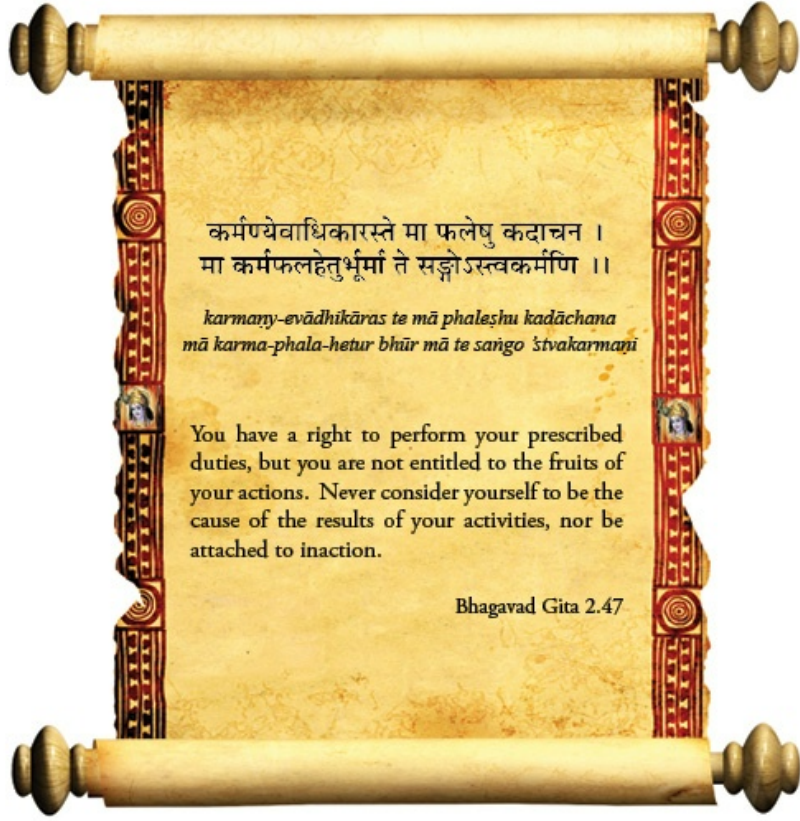
Kunti, Draupadi, and Subhadra had been praying and praying and now they were joyful. They danced and sang and when Draupadi finally saw Bheem she said prayers of gratitude to Krishna for her husband's life.

With Jarasandh's death, the fame of the Pandavas spread far and wide.

Tributes and alliances from all the kingdoms on earth flowed into Indraprastha. Even hostile kings turned friends because they were afraid of the Pandavas' might. The four younger brothers took armies and went on expeditions to the north, south, east, and west, gaining formal permission and tribute from every king so that Indraprastha could pay for the expenses of the *Rajsuya*.

Their Elder Father Dhritarashtra sent permission from Hastinapur as they'd known he would.

Yudhishtir would perform the *Rajsuya*. He would be emperor.



कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

*karmāṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvākarmaṇi*

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.

Bhagavad Gita 2.47



38. Rajsuya

The Pandavas sent out invitations all over the land. Kings began to pour into Indraprastha.

The Bharat clan from Hastinapur came for the *yajna*, of course. Dhritarashtra came to Indraprastha with every sign of joy on his face, even though his heart boiled with envy. The Pandavas were performing the *Rajsuya* while his own sons were not! By contrast, Bheeshma, Vidur, Gandhari, Dronacharya, and Kripacharya all traveled to Indraprastha filled with joy for they loved the Pandavas and were proud of their achievements.

When Duryodhan saw the wealth and luxury of Indraprastha, he was furious that he had only ancient and old-fashioned Hastinapur. He should have been given Khandav Prashta, he thought. This palace should have been his!

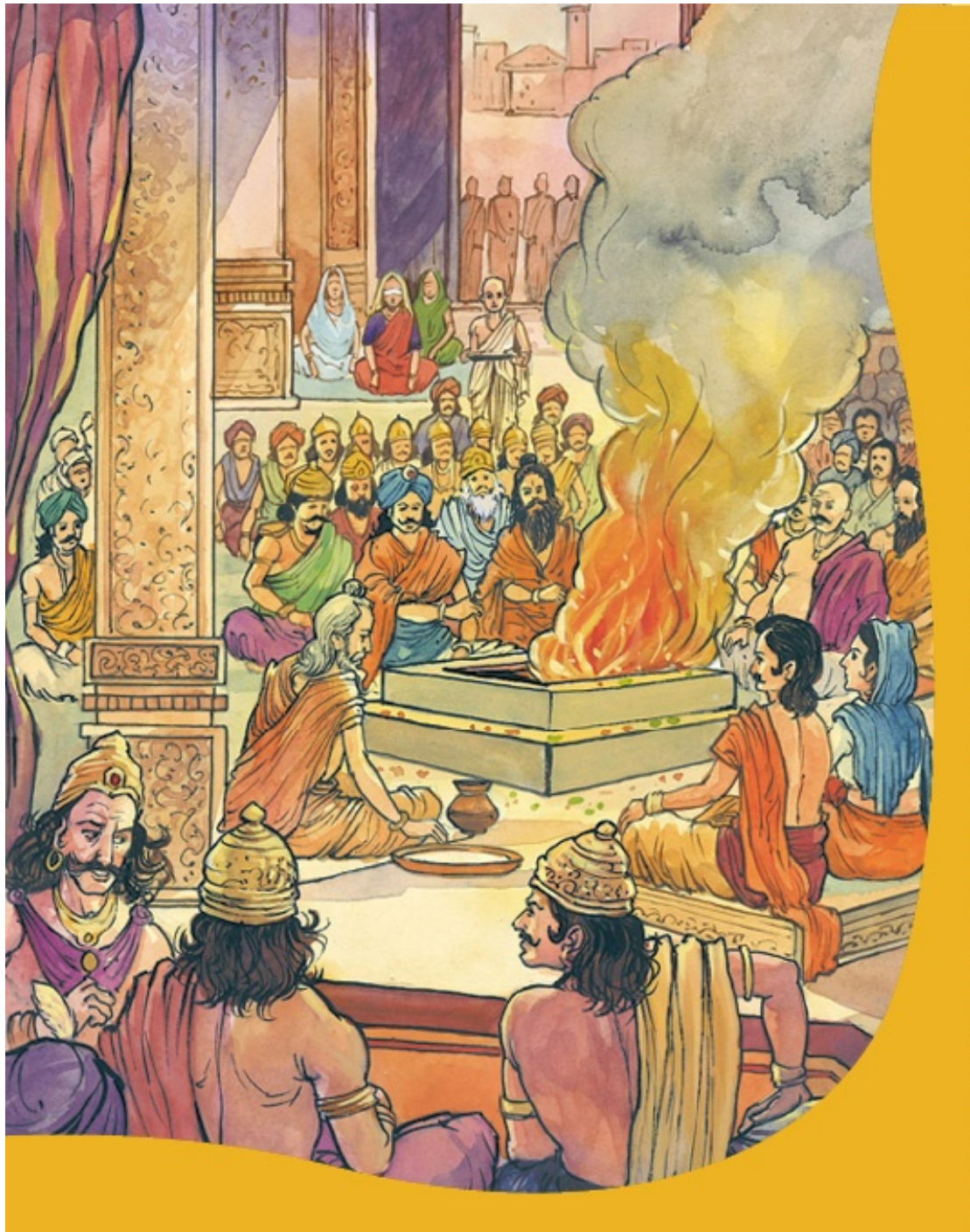
Krishna and the Yadus came from Dwaraka. Drupad, Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi came from Panchal. Jarasandh's son Sahadev from Magadh. Shishupal came from Chedi, Karn came from Anga, Viraat from Matsya, Shalya from Madra, and Suvahu from Kashi. Shakuni's son Uluk came from Gandhar, Jayadrath from Shalva, Rukmi from Vidarbha, and countless other kings from lands near and distant.

With Dhaumya and Kunti's guidance, the Pandavas organized them all in

guest mansions and palaces around the city. Draupadi expertly saw to the guests' needs, ensuring that their chambers were clean, their clothes laundered, their servants housed and fed, their every need anticipated. She prepared rich foods for each and every guest and cooked with her own hands feasts upon feasts to serve the vast numbers of Pundits.

The sages were housed in the palatial gardens of the royal apartments. Headed by Narad and Vyas themselves, they praised the Pandavas and blessed their efforts. Krishna aided the *yajna* by worshipping the feet of the sages. He even served by picking up the dirty plates left over from their feast. When Draupadi saw this, she was overcome with love.

The huge *yajna* arena was erected with flashing glass and crystal tiles. The fire pit itself was an earthen mound surrounded by golden seats. There were numerous other *yajna* pits surrounding it to ensure that everyone who wished to partake of the *yajna* could sit and place their offerings into the sacred fire.



The celestials gathered above in the sky to watch the sacrifice, gladdened to see such a pious use of the earth's resources.

Yudhishthir and Draupadi sat the head of the *yajna*, Krishna and the younger Pandavas flanking them on either side. Solemn-faced, they performed the rites exactly as Dhaumya instructed, guided by Vyas who was appointed Lord of the *yajna*. The wealth that had been gifted by all the guests and participants was distributed amongst the Pundits. The *devatas* were satisfied

by the offerings of *ghee* and rice and showered blessings upon the *yajna*.

On the final day, Yudhishtir and Draupadi were sprinkled with sacred water and Vyas performed the *raj tilak*. As Vyas applied the vermillion *tilak* to Yudhishtir's forehead, conch shells were blown in every corner of the kingdom, every soul rejoicing in the triumph of dharma. King Yudhishtir was now Emperor Yudhishtir.

As Vyas blessed Empress Draupadi, he looked at her gravely and said: "Take care of your hair, my daughter." This confused everyone, especially Draupadi. Why did the sage mention such a mundane thing at such a momentous occasion?

Yudhishtir and Draupadi touched Vyas's feet in reverence and sat upon their throne, which was now the emperor and empress's throne in Indraprastha. It was their duty now to honor each of their guests who had blessed this occasion and Yudhishtir asked Grandsire Bheeshma who was fit to be honored first, Bheeshma himself or Sage Vyas?

"Neither I, nor Sage Vyas," Bheeshma said, and Vyas nodded in agreement. "There is only one who should be honored above all others and that is Shree Krishna, son of Devaki."

The crowd hushed as Bheeshma continued: "Krishna is the Almighty, Krishna is salvation, Krishna is the root of the tree of dharma. To honor Krishna is to honor all the celestials, all the sages, all the elders, all the mothers, all the fathers, all the world, as watering the roots of the tree waters the whole tree itself." Bheeshma went to Krishna and bade him rise from his seat.

The musicians sang songs of praise and the youngest Pandava, Sahadev, brought forth the *puja* plate. He and Bheeshma escorted Krishna to a seat at the emperor's right hand. Sahadev joyfully washed the Lord's feet with rose water, patting them dry with his own garment. He then adorned Krishna with a fragrant jewel-studded flower garland and dipped his finger into the vermillion to apply the *tilak* to Krishna's forehead.

"Sahadev!" someone shouted.

The entire court jerked.

It was Shishupal who spoke, his splendid silk garments glinting in the

reflection of the glass tiles beneath his feet. Shishupal was Krishna's cousin who'd once thought he would marry Rukmini and rule the world under King Jarasandh. Now he sneered at Sahadev. "How dare you treat this cowherd with such respect, when there are real kings in this court!" he spat.

The court gasped. Sahadev did not gasp, however. He stood calmly, unmoved by Shishupal's insults. "I worship Krishna with all my heart," Sahadev said. "He is more worthy of worship than anyone." Sahadev applied the *tilak*, causing the *devatas* to shower flowers on both he and Krishna.

Shishupal couldn't bear to see even the celestials honoring Krishna. "If any should be honored," he screamed, "it should be Vyas or Dhritarashtra. Not this coward who steals other men's brides!"

The entire Yadu clan leaped to their feet, their hands reaching for weapons. "Stop!" Krishna told them. "Let him speak."

"Let him speak," Shishupal mocked. "Of course I'll speak! I don't need your permission, fraud."

Draupadi looked ready to kill Shishupal herself, sparks flying from her eyes.

"The only reason any of us are here," Shishupal continued, "is because we thought Yudhishtir followed dharma. But he's just as much of a fraud as Krishna if he thinks it's acceptable to honor a peasant. This criminal, Krishna, killed my uncle Kansa!"

"Shishupal!" Bheemand Arjun shouted together.

"Arjun, Bheem!" Yudhishtir said. "Don't forget that Shishupal is our guest."

"Oh, shut up," Shishupal snapped at Yudhishtir. "You think that you're respected just because you did a *yajna*? You think Krishna should be revered just because that senile old Bheeshma said he was the Almighty?"

The entire Bharat clan was on its feet. Even Duryodhan and Dushasan were outraged.

"Bheeshma lost his wits years ago, back when he vowed celibacy."

Bheem was about to leap for Shishupal's throat when Bheeshma ordered him not to. "Shishupal," Bheeshma said simply, "if this wasn't my Yudhishtir's

day of triumph then I would cut out your tongue and silence you forever.”

“Grandsire,” Krishna said, putting his hand on Bheeshma’s shoulder. “He’s not trying to insult you but me. Let him speak.”

“You, Krishna, are a beggar!” Shishupal continued, “You’re not a royal, you’re like a dog which laps at the *ghee* it’s stolen. You think that we honor you? We despise you! Kings!” He glared around the court at the kings who’d once claimed allegiance to Jarasandh. “Your honor is besmirched by remaining in this court. Rise and destroy this *yajna*!”

Kings began to stand and join him in the center of the court, anger rolling off their bodies like water rolling off elephants’ backs.

“Shishupal!” Balaram shouted, moving towards the steps.

“Elder Brother,” Krishna said, grabbing Balaram’s arm. “Let him speak.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Balaram cried. “He’s offending everyone, our parents, our family, our honor! He will start a war if we don’t stop him but you do nothing.”

“I have a reason. Remember the promise I made to his mother?”

Balaram then remembered the vow Krishna had made, when it was predicted by an oracle that Krishna would kill Shishupal. He’d vowed to their aunt, Shishupal’s mother Shrutadeva, that he would forgive Shishupal one hundred grievous offenses.

Shishupal had already committed so many with Jarasandh that he was close to his limit. “Keep talking, Shishupal,” Krishna said. “For you have offended and stolen and killed and raped and I have borne it only for the sake of your mother. Now you have but three offenses left to you.”

“Ha!” Shishupal snarled, his eyes red with the insanity of hate. “As if you could hurt me! I am a true warrior while you are a peasant. I spit on your cowherd village. I spit on your peasant parents. I will go and capture all those *gopis* of Vraj who call you their lord. I will raze Vraj to the ground when I’m done destroying Indraprastha,” he said.

“Stop!” Krishna said, holding up his hand. “Stop there if you want to live.” Krishna lifted his hand and summoned his *sudarshan chakra*. It appeared in a

flash of light, spinning so fast around his finger that all anyone could see was a gleam of golden death. “No one will blame me if I kill you now, villain.”

Shishupal laughed and drew his sword. “I’ll stop when you’re dead.” He charged Krishna. The kings behind him drew their swords also, ready to support him.

Krishna threw his *chakra*. It sliced through the air and a split-second later returned to Krishna’s finger.

Then the crowd saw that Shishupal’s head wobbled, then tilted, then toppled to the ground. His body fell forward onto the tiles, blood pouring onto the ground.

The kings who’d supported him cowered from Krishna’s *chakra*, falling to their knees.

The ladies in the court turned away in revulsion and the Pundits praised Krishna for protecting them. Draupadi and Sahadev looked at each other in grim satisfaction.

“Our cousin Shishupal’s death is unfortunate,” Yudhishtir said to calm the crowd, “but his uncouth behavior made it an eventuality. I therefore make it clear here and now that his son, Manipal, will be crowned King of Chedi as soon as Shishupal is cremated. We bear no ill will towards the clan of Chedi or their people and they will remain an independent state.”

Yudhishtir ordered his brothers to take Shishupal’s body away for its last rites and they obeyed. Manipal was brought forward to Yudhishtir to receive condolences and the kings who had stood with Shishupal tripped over themselves to ask forgiveness of the emperor. Yudhishtir granted their wish.

Meanwhile, Krishna looked at his *sudarshan chakra* and it disappeared, returning to its resting place. That was when Draupadi saw that Krishna’s finger was bleeding.

Gasping, she ran forward. His precious blood was dripping down his finger. Draupadi tore a strip of fabric from her own priceless sari and wrapped it around his wound. “Giridhar,” she cried, “does it hurt?” She pressed her fingers against the wound to stem the blood loss, her own delicate hands becoming red with his blood.

The entire court was enchanted to see her concern. Krishna was most enchanted of all. He smiled at her. "Not anymore, Krishnaa," he said tenderly. "I'm in your debt for this bandage. When the time comes I will repay you for each and every thread."



39. Humiliation

The *yajna* ended and their guests began to make their way home. Krishna embraced Yudhishtir as he took his leave. “Emperor, cherish your people as a father cherishes his children,” he told him. “Be like the tree that shelters all life beneath it. I am always with you.”

Before he left, Narad told Yudhishtir that he had seen portents of destruction. Alarmed, Yudhishtir asked Vyas what it meant. “Surely, with the death of Shishupal,” Yudhishtir asked, “this destruction will also cease?”

“Emperor, Shishupal was just the beginning. For thirteen years these portents will be seen,” Vyas revealed. “And at the end there will be a great destruction of all the evil on earth. There will be a terrible war of retribution between brothers. Therefore, Yudhishtir, rule with dharma and love, so your subjects feel not this pain.”

Only Duryodhan and Shakuni remained behind in Indraprastha. Shakuni insisted that they and the Pandavas play a game of dice. “There is no better way,” Shakuni said, “for brothers to spend time together.”

Yudhishtir won the dice match, beating Duryodhan easily. Duryodhan left in a sulk and wandered around the magical palace. He found one room where the floor blazed with fire. He yelled for help but the guard who came said there

was no fire. "Go forward, Crown Prince," the guard said, bowing. "There is no danger."

Duryodhan realized that it was an illusion. He came to another room where the floor seemed as if it were a rushing river. He halted but then saw a maid walk across the waves. She bowed to him and said he should proceed, that there was no danger. Amazed and delighted, Duryodhan walked across the river.

He saw rooms where the ceilings looked like the starry night sky or a thunderous day or bright blue perfection. He saw rooms where celestial music emanated from the walls. Duryodhan finally came to a room that seemed normal. It had a beautiful mosaic tile pattern in the center of the floor. A maid bowed as she passed him. "Be careful, Crown Prince. There is water ahead."

Duryodhan squinted at the room. "There is no water," he scoffed and continued.

Splash!

Gasping, dripping, he dragged himself to his feet. He'd fallen into the floor, where he'd thought there was a beautiful mosaic pattern. Instead it was a pond, the tiles beneath made of such sparkling crystal that they'd rendered the water invisible.

People were laughing. His face burning, Duryodhan looked up.

Standing on a balcony above his head were Draupadi with her ladies, and they were all laughing at Duryodhan. Bheem stepped through a doorway to join them right at that moment. Draupadi took Bheem's arm while pointing down at Duryodhan. "The blind son of a blind father," she said to Bheem and they laughed and laughed.

Duryodhan's vision went red. He and Shakuni left Indraprastha and Duryodhan was so angry that he could barely remember what he said to Yudhishtir in parting. Back home at his palace in Hastinapur, he told Shakuni of his humiliation.

His uncle gave a grim smile. "Don't worry, nephew," Shakuni said. "Revenge is within our reach."

“Revenge? But how? The Pandavas are so powerful now! I’m humiliated by their success, their wealth, their palace. Even by their wife!” Duryodhan bemoaned. “I even lost a dice match to them! I want to kill myself. I’ll take poison, or cut my throat, or throw myself off a cliff.”

Shakuni sighed. “Why do you think I proposed that dice match in the first place? So you would lose.”

“You wanted me to lose?” Duryodhan shouted. He stood, picked up his chair and smashed it into the ground. “Everyone is against me! It’s not fair! Indraprastha should be mine!”

Shakuni ducked as Duryodhan destroyed the room. “I meant for you to lose so we’d have an excuse to ask them here for a re-match! Then, nephew, we will have our revenge.”

“What?” Duryodhan slowed in punching the carved window screens to pieces.

“Yes,” Shakuni said patiently. “There is no one better than me at gambling. Tell your father to call the Pandavas here for a re-match.”

Duryodhan did exactly that and Dhritarashtra, aware of how jealous and hurt Duryodhan was by the Pandavas’ success, agreed. He sent Vidur to Indraprastha with the invitation.

Vidur said to Yudhishtir: “Gambling is an evil thing. It is the root cause of dissension and conflict. Don’t accept the invitation.”

“But how can I refuse an invitation from Elder Father?” Yudhishtir said. “And if I refuse won’t that cause even more dissension and conflict?” He told Vidur the Pandavas would come and together with Draupadi they traveled to Hastinapur.

The Pandavas were happy to be home in their father’s city and Gandhari was happy that her sons and Kunti’s sons were friends, after all the ugliness of the past.

The Pandavas and Kauravas were in the gambling arena while Draupadi rested in her apartments. A doorman came to the entrance of her chamber. “Empress,” he said, “I bring word from the gambling hall.”

She looked up. “Yes?”

The doorman was pale-faced. "The Emperor... He has lost his wealth."

Draupadi blinked, thinking she'd not heard right. "What?"

"He's lost all his wealth. He's even lost his crown."

"What!"

"It was so strange," the doorman said, almost speaking to himself. "King Shakuni threw the dice for Crown Prince Duryodhan and he kept winning and winning. Emperor Yudhishtir had to keep raising the stakes and..."

Loaded dice, Draupadi instantly thought. *Treachery*. She narrowed her eyes. "And?"

"And he was finally left with nothing. That was when he staked his brothers."

Draupadi became light-headed. "He what?" She shook herself. "No. My husband is virtuous. He would never stake his own brothers—"

"Empress... He even staked himself. And when he lost that, he staked you."

Draupadi went numb, as if her body was foreign to her. Yudhishtir loved her. She was his empress, the mother of his son. How could he stake her in a gambling match as if she was just a possession?

"Crown Prince Duryodhan asked that you come to the gambling hall," the doorman said.

Draupadi's blood turned to ice in her veins. "No," she said, her voice rigid. "I will never go there. Ask the elders what they think of their daughter-in-law being staked."

"The elders were all present. Bheeshma tried to stop the match early on, as did Vidur and Drona and Kripa, but Crown Prince Duryodhan argued and they were silenced."

She stared at the doormen in horror. "They watched me be staked and did not protest!" She clenched her hands. "You go back there and ask them if it is righteous for a man to stake his own wife. And if it is, then how can a man who is not free stake the freedom of another?"

The doorman bowed himself out. The next thing Draupadi knew, Dushasan

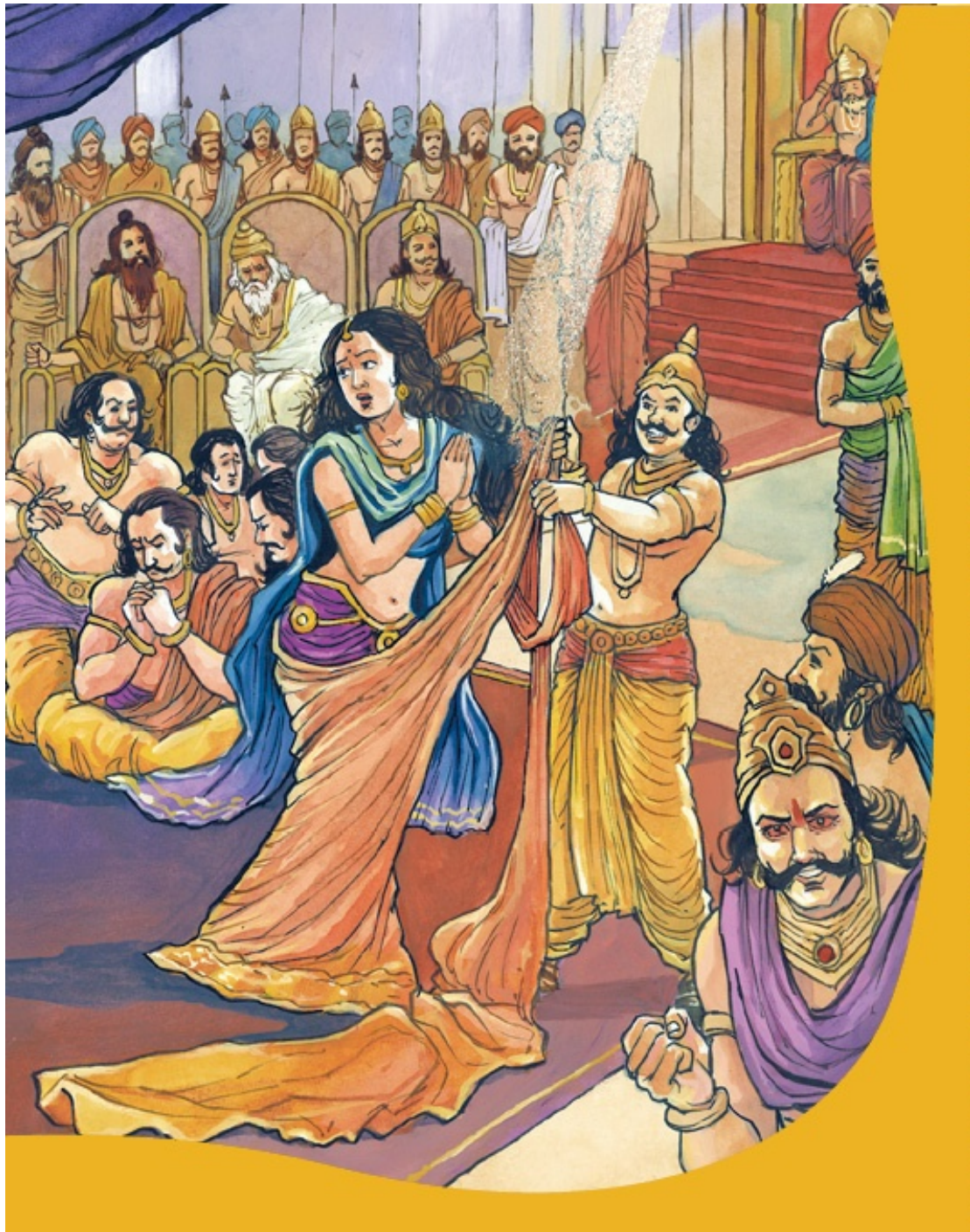
was at the door of her chamber. Without asking permission, he entered, and she shrieked in outrage.

Since she'd been resting, Draupadi was dressed in simple clothes, her hair unbound and falling down her back. Dushasan grabbed her long shiny hair. She screamed, trying to pull away, asking how he could do this, asking what his mother Gandhari would say. He ignored Draupadi's words and dragged her to the gambling hall that was filled with evil men.

The Pandavas heard their wife weeping and fighting as she was pulled by her hair but they couldn't rise to protect her. Their crowns were laid at Duryodhan's feet, their armor shed as they kneeled defenseless before him.

"Here she is, the fire-born Draupadi!" Dushasan cried in triumph, presenting her as if she were a trophy. The Kauravas laughed and pointed at her.

She pushed Dushasan away and ran to the elders on the dais. "I'm your daughter-in-law!" she cried but they hung their heads and did not answer.



Dhritarashtra only said: “Don’t ask me for help, Draupadi. Your husband didn’t ask my advice before staking you and my son didn’t ask my advice before winning you. I cannot help.”

“You are King!” she reminded him but he turned his face away. She knew then that even the king of Hastinapur plotted against her husbands. “What husband has a right to stake his wife?” she wailed to the court.

Duryodhan leered at her. “Stop complaining and come sit on my thigh. You’re

mine.”

Her fury scorched the gambling hall, warriors cringing backwards. The only ones who did not cringe were the Kauravas.

“I vow I will break your thigh one day,” Bheem warned Duryodhan, who laughed at him.

“Draupadi, why fight your fate?” Karn asked from his seat beside Duryodhan. “You already have five husbands so what’s wrong with accepting a sixth? A woman with five husbands has no honor anyway.” Draupadi choked on a cry but he didn’t stop. “Even if you were naked it wouldn’t mean anything. You’re just a prostitute.”

Draupadi gasped, tears of rage leaking from her eyes, and Arjun snarled, “I vow to kill you, Karn.”

“Shut up, slave!” Duryodhan snapped. “My friend is absolutely right! What honor can a woman with five husbands have? Dushasan, strip her naked.”

“If you do that, Dushasan,” Bheem roared, “I’ll kill you with my bare hands and drink your blood! I vow it!”

Dushasan laughed. “You’ll do nothing, slave.” He reached for Draupadi’s sari.

She pulled away, sure that someone would help her. But her husbands did nothing. Dushasan got hold of her sari and the elders did nothing. She struggled to free herself and the courtiers did nothing. She caught her sari in her teeth to hold it in place and the guards did nothing. All turned away. She had no one and Draupadi realized that truth for the first time in her life. She was alone.

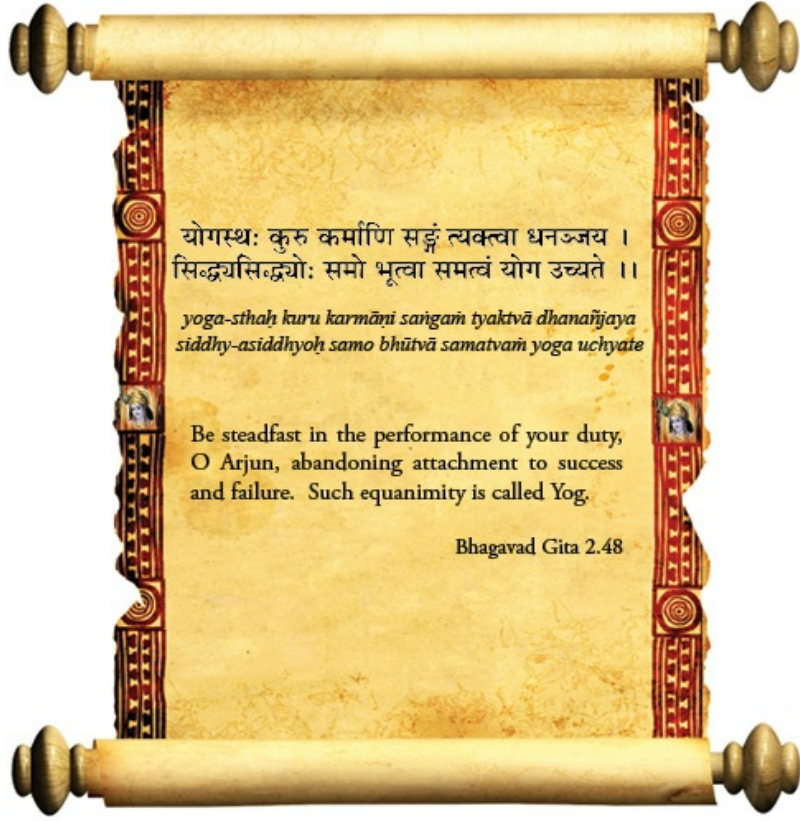
“Krishna,” she whispered, tears pouring down her face. “You are all I have. Protect me.” Dushasan pulled and she felt her sari slipping from her skin. “Krishna Krishna Krishna,” she chanted, surrendering her body, mind, and soul to her Lord.

Duryodhan, Karn, and Shakuni were all cheering as Dushasan yanked off her clothes. He pulled and her sari fell to the ground but Draupadi was still dressed.

“Krishna Krishna Krishna,” she chanted, tears of love flowing from her eyes.

“Krishna Krishna Krishna.” Dushasan pulled, miles and miles of sari piling around the floor but she was still dressed, not an inch of skin uncovered. The entire court saw this miracle. Dushasan continued to pull until he finally collapsed of exhaustion and Draupadi fell to her knees, her hands covering her face.

The gambling hall was silent. All that could be heard was Draupadi weeping.



योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय ।
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥

*yoga-sthah kuru karmāṇi saṅgam tyaktvā dhananjaya
siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga uchyate*

Be steadfast in the performance of your duty,
O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success
and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog.

Bhagavad Gita 2.48



40. Exile

The gambling hall was frozen in time, no one able to think or move. No one except Vidur, who stood and walked to Draupadi.

“Now that we have seen the impossible, we must admit that we have all lost our honor this day,” he said to the court. “By failing to protect Draupadi and by failing to give her the truth, we have destroyed ourselves. We are liars, thieves, criminals before the Almighty. Therefore, Draupadi, arise! You must go elsewhere for justice for Hastinapur is a dead land, filled only with corpses.”

Trembling, weeping, she grabbed the end of her sari and threw it over her shoulder. Standing, her face covered in sweat and tears, she glared around her. “To all you cowards gathered here today,” she spat, “I curse you that-”

“No!”

The court jumped, turning to the door where Gandhari stood with her maid. The blindfolded queen came closer, enfolding Draupadi in tender arms. “My daughter, do not curse them. Though they have shamed us all before the world and our ancestors, they are still family. Duryodhan!”

Duryodhan was sullen. “Yes, Mother?”

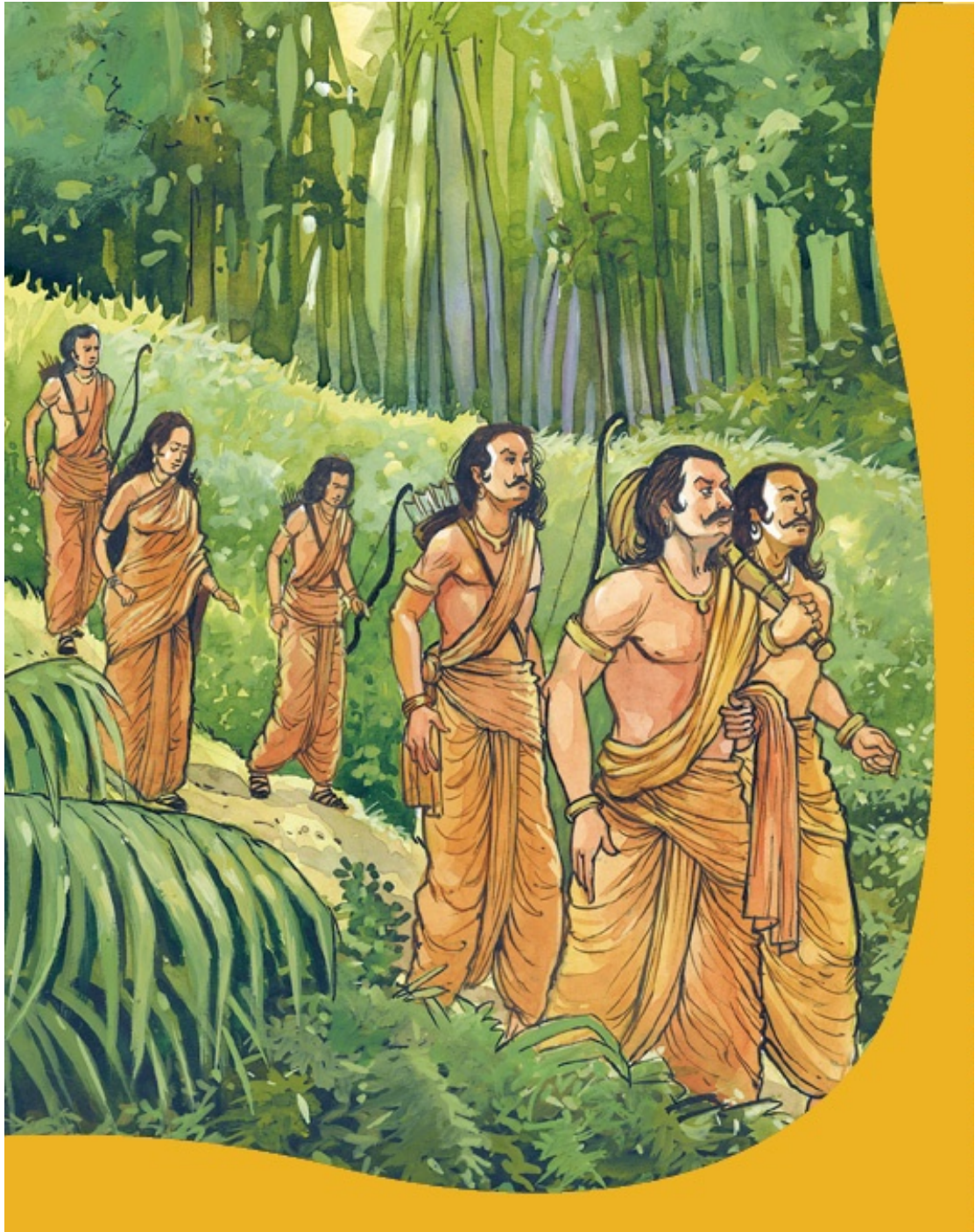
“Tell Dushasan to strip me naked also.”

Duryodhan gasped and Shakuni slammed his fist into a pillow.

“Why do you hesitate, you wretch?” Gandhari demanded. “If this is how women are to be treated then I shouldn’t be left out!” she screamed at him then turned to Dhritarashtra. “How could you sit here in silence?” she said to him. “How could you let your daughter-in-law be treated this way?” Gandhari shook her head. “If this pure devotee of Krishna curses you then not even your great army can save you!”

Dhritarashtra stood, his face pale with fear. “Gandhari is right. Daughter,” he said to Draupadi, “ask me for a boon.”

“I ask for the Emperor’s freedom,” Draupadi said.



“I grant it,” Dhritarashtra said. “What else?”

“I ask for the freedom of the younger Pandavas, along with all of their weapons and chariots.”

“I grant that also. What else?”

“Greed is a terrible vice,” Draupadi said. “A warrior woman may not ask for more than two boons.”

“But I want to give more,” Dhritarashtra said. “All that the Pandavas have lost today is returned to them.”

Duryodhan and his brothers sat grinding their teeth. They’d used loaded dice to win the match but what was the use in cheating if their father was only going to give everything back?

Gandhari asked Draupadi to forgive all and Draupadi said that she would forgive everyone except Duryodhan, Dushasan, Shakuni, and Karn.

The Pandavas left the gambling hall with Draupadi while Duryodhan retired in private with Shakuni, Karn, and Dushasan. If only Draupadi hadn’t come to the hall and frightened the king! they said to each other, not caring that it was they themselves who had dragged Draupadi there and abused her.

Duryodhan went to see his father. “If we don’t have another dice match then I’ll kill myself,” he raged.

Dhritarashtra reached out, frantically holding onto his son. “No! How can you even say that, Duryodhan?”

“Then let there be another dice match between the Pandavas and Kauravas. These will be the rules...”

When Gandhari heard, she rushed to her husband’s chamber. “Don’t do it,” she told him. “Abandon our son Duryodhan or he will destroy the entire Bharat clan.” Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Vidur, and many others agreed with her.

A messenger came to the Pandavas, just as they were leaving the palace. Their Elder Father summoned Yudhishtir who obeyed. He was ordered by Dhritarashtra to play another gambling match. “The rules,” Dhritarashtra said to him, “will be that whoever loses will go into exile for twelve years and live the thirteenth year incognito. If discovered during the year of incognito then that person will go into exile for another twelve years and another year incognito.”

Yudhishtir saw the trap clearly enough but this was Elder Father. How could Yudhishtir refuse his orders? Yudhishtir agreed to the terms and the Pandavas came to the gambling hall the next day, accompanied by Draupadi.

She glared at everyone who met her eyes and the courtiers turned away in shame. The only ones who were not ashamed were Duryodhan, Dushasan, Karn and Shakuni, who all smirked at her. Her skin crawled to be near them.

The Pandavas lost the match, as they'd known they would. They went to their chambers and cast off their royal robes and jewels. They dressed in rough plain garments of poverty.

Kunti said she would go with her sons for she would never live in the same palace where her daughter-in-law had been abused. Vidur, however, protested this plan. "Your mother is an elderly lady now," he told the Pandavas. "How will she bear the rigors of the forest? Let her stay with me and my wife in our house until you return."

Grateful to their uncle for all his help, the Pandavas entrusted their mother to him. Then, together with Draupadi, they took their leave of the elders, ignoring the Kauravas who taunted them.

Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa were devastated. They'd tried to stop the dice match, but Duryodhan had spoken against all of them. He'd said that they were biting the hand that fed them, that they were disloyal to the throne of Hastinapur. Since their dharma was to serve the king of Hastinapur, and the king allowed Duryodhan to do whatever he wanted, they were caught in the net of their own loyalty.

They were bowed down with the weight of their shame. They felt as if it had been their hands that had hurt Draupadi, their words that had insulted her. They prayed to Krishna, asking forgiveness while knowing they deserved none.

The people of Hastinapur and Indraprastha grieved. They knew that now there would be no justice for them. Many followed the Pandavas into the forest, wishing to be close to them even if it meant exile. The Pandavas had to persuade them to return to the city, promising that they would return in thirteen years.

The Pandavas were accompanied by Dhaumya into the forest. Only a few days ago they'd slept in their magical palace, surrounded by luxury and power and wealth. Now they were beggars, making a hut out of mud and straw, with not even two gold coins to rub together. They lived in that hut, eating berries and

nuts and leaves they could gather in the forest. Nakul and Sahadev chopped wood for fuel, and Bheem and Arjun cleared pathways through the forest for their use. They maintained a constant guard around the hut, keeping their area safe from wild animals and even wilder humans.

Yudhishtir sat in penitence most days as Dhaumya chanted the Vedas. Yudhishtir was so ashamed of himself that he could barely look at his family. He couldn't understand what had happened to him in that gambling hall.

He was guilty before all the world. He was guilty before Krishna. As Yudhishtir sat in meditation one day, he realized what had been his first crime. When that invitation to gamble had first come, he'd accepted because he was an emperor and he'd thought he was invincible. That was why he'd not asked Krishna for advice. He'd not even sent a messenger to tell Krishna they were going to Hastinapur. He'd forgotten the Lord.

But why? he asked himself. *Why did I forget?* Maybe, he thought, maybe it was because he'd known Krishna would not approve. Maybe, Yudhishtir admitted to himself, he'd wanted to gamble and he'd known that Krishna would say no.

I destroyed my family because of my weakness, he thought. *I destroyed all that was good because gambling made me forget Krishna.*

His brothers talked constantly of war. Arjun vowed to kill Karn. Bheem vowed to kill Dushasan and Duryodhan. Sahadev vowed to kill Shakuni. And Nakul vowed to kill all the rest of the Kauravas. Draupadi left her hair unbound and vowed that she would not bind it again until she'd washed it with Dushasan's blood.

Yudhishtir heard them all and understood their anger, yet he couldn't be angry at anyone but himself. It was true that the Kauravas were evil. They'd cheated in the dice match and committed many sins, but until Yudhishtir cleansed himself of his bad *karm*, he could not fight any wars. Forgiveness was the greatest path, he told his family. "Forgiveness is sacrifice. Forgiveness is *bhakti*. Until I forgive those who have wronged me, I cannot say I stand for dharma."

"I know what forgiveness is," Draupadi said to him. "I forgave you, did I not? But this is not just about you or I. It's about right and wrong. How can we let

the Kauravas rule when they are so evil? They will destroy society. They will abuse all women the way they abused me.” Tears filled her eyes and she turned away, overcome by memories of that terrible day.

Arjun embraced her and rocked her, feeling her tears on his shoulder. He sang Krishna’s name as if it were a lullaby. Slowly, Draupadi joined in the song, chanting Krishna Krishna Krishna, the only name that made her happy. *If only Krishna were here*, she thought, heartbroken.

“Krishnaa,” a deep voice said and Draupadi looked up in shock. Krishna was standing in the doorway of their hut. Crying out, she ran to him, her husbands behind her. Krishna embraced them all and Yudhishtir asked how the Lord came to be in the forest.

Krishna looked at Draupadi. “I suddenly thought of my Pandavas and my feet turned in this direction.” He told them, to their relief, that he’d taken Subhadra and Abhimanyu to Dwaraka and had sent Draupadi’s sons to their grandfather King Drupad in Panchal.

“You’re right to be penitent,” Krishna said to Yudhishtir. “You must atone for the wrongs committed in the gambling hall. But Krishnaa,” he said, putting his hand on Draupadi’s unbound hair. “You will have justice. I promise you that, my dear one.”



41. Doom

Krishna came often to visit them. The Pandavas traveled around the forests, staying in different areas yet somehow Krishna always found them. Draupadi's father, Drupad, and her brothers, Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi, also came to see them and comfort Draupadi.

One day, Sage Durvasa visited the Pandavas, bringing thousands of his students with him. "We'll eat dinner," he told Yudhishtir. "See that food is prepared while we bathe."

Yudhishtir stood with his hands folded respectfully to the sage who was Kunti's own guru. The Pandavas existed because Guru Durvasa had given their mother that secret mantra. "Food will be ready," Yudhishtir said while inside he was panicking. How would they feed all these people? When Durvasa and his students went to the river, Yudhishtir ran inside to Draupadi who was alone in the hut. "What do we have to eat?"

Draupadi was cleaning the utensils. "Nothing," she said in surprise. "We just ate."

"What are we going to do?" Yudhishtir moaned, clutching his head. "Sage Durvasa and his disciples want dinner. If we have nothing to serve them then he'll become angry and curse us!"

Draupadi's dark skin went pale. "Sage Durvasa?" she whispered. She looked down at the pot in her hand. "Who would have guessed that the Emperor and Empress of Indraprastha would worry about feeding a sage and his disciples? Who could have known that we would live in such poverty as this?"

Draupadi felt beaten down with hopelessness. Guru Durvasa would curse them for disobedience. Their Bharat ancestors would curse them for failing to serve a guest. They were doomed and Draupadi saw no way out. "Oh Krishna," she whispered.

"Krishnaa," a deep voice said from the doorway. Draupadi and Yudhishtir looked up. It was Krishna! They fell at his feet. "Lord, help us!" Yudhishtir begged.

"Why do you think I'm here? But first, what do you have to eat? I'm so hungry, Krishnaa!"

Draupadi's face burned. "We have no food, Giridhar," she said.

"You must have something. What's in this pot?" Krishna lifted a clay pot, peering inside. "Ah, you see! You have one grain of cooked rice." He plucked it out and popped it in his mouth. "Mmmmm, tasty, Krishnaa! Now I'm so full."

"Already?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Your cooking is so full of love that I'm satisfied by just one grain."

At the river, Sage Durvasa and his disciples were looking at each other in confusion. "Why do I feel so full all of a sudden?" one of his disciples said. "I feel as if I've just eaten rice pudding!" "So do I!" "And I!" They all agreed, rubbing their bellies. "I'm so stuffed!" one of them moaned.

"But what about the food the Pandavas have cooked?" Durvasa said.

"Better to leave now, Gurudev," another disciple said. "Otherwise we'll commit the sin of gluttony."

People all over the world experienced the same sensation of fullness. With one half of a rice grain Krishna had fed himself. With the other half, he fed the entire world.

Yudhishtir and Draupadi sat at their ease with Krishna. "I don't know what

I've done to deserve such kindness from you," Draupadi told him. "Whenever I need you, you are here."

"I am always in your heart," Krishna said, looking at them both. "When you think of me, I simply come outwards and stand before you."

Sometime later, Vyas came to visit the Pandavas and he took Yudhishtir away to sit in private. "War is coming, son of Kunti."

"It cannot be averted?" Yudhishtir asked.

"Not if you wish for dharma to prevail on earth. The Kauravas are the epitome of evil and even now they exploit the two kingdoms they rule. In order to protect your people, you will have to prepare to fight for them when your exile is over. If this war does come to pass then you'll face Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa, whose allegiances lie with Hastinapur's throne. Not only are they undefeated and your own beloved elders, they have divine weapons. As does Karn."

"So what should I do, Great Sage?"

"Send Arjun to seek the divine weapons," Vyas advised and then took his leave.

Yudhishtir told Arjun Vyas's words. Obedient to his brother, Arjun took leave of both Yudhishtir and Bheem, touching their feet in respect. He embraced Nakul and Sahadev and lastly, he turned to Draupadi. "I'll return as soon as I can," he told her, kissing her forehead.

The Pandavas and Draupadi watched him leave, carrying his famous *gandiv* bow and arrows. They were downcast even before he was out of sight.

One day, as Draupadi served her husbands the noon meal, Bheem started lamenting. "Why should our wife have to live like this?" he cried. "She is a *Devi*, born from the holy fire! Why should Panchali live in this mud hut, far from all comfort and ease? And all because you gambled," he accused his elder brother.

Yudhishtir bowed his head. "I know. But I cannot fight the Kauravas until I have repented. I cannot break my word that I will live in exile for thirteen years."

“And in the meantime we must all suffer!” Bheem shouted. “Panchali has to sleep on the floor and ruin her hands on menial work!”

“She may return to Panchal whenever she wishes,” Yudhishtir protested.

“You know that I would never leave you,” Draupadi said.

“Argh!” Bheem pushed his plate away and stood up. “I need to fight someone.” He stormed out and Draupadi watched him go, worry filling her lotus eyes.

Sahadev was grim-faced. “He didn’t even eat,” he said, gesturing to Bheem’s plate.

“Brother Bheem hates to go hungry,” Nakul added. “He’ll come back.”

“Not today,” Draupadi shook her head, knowing that Bheem needed more than food to soothe him.

Yudhishtir looked as if he would be ill. He bowed to his plate and rose. Nakul and Sahadev did the same. “How can we eat when Bheem is hungry?” Yudhishtir said to Draupadi, leaving the hut, followed by the twins.

Tears slipped down her face as Draupadi also abandoned her meal. It was true. None of them could eat if Bheem had not. Draupadi wondered if Arjun had eaten that day. She wondered where he was.

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः ।
वातरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ॥

*duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ sukhēṣhu vigata-sprīhaḥ
vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ sthīta-dhīr munir uchyate*

One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst
misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and
who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is
called a sage of steady wisdom.

Bhagavad Gita 2.56



42. Divine

Arjun was meditating upon Indra. Sitting beneath a tree, his *gandiv* bow and quiver at his side, he focused his consciousness on the name of Indra. He didn't know how long he sat. He didn't rise to eat or drink or sleep or even simply to move. He sat still, meditating upon his father.

Indra appeared to him. "My son, ask me for a boon."

Arjun bowed before the king of the celestial realm. "Lord, I seek the divine weapons."

"I guard many of them," Indra said. "But before I grant them you must obtain Lord Shiv's permission. Only then will the weapons obey your will. Therefore, son of Kunti, meditate on Lord Shiv."

Meanwhile, Bheem wandered the forest. He kicked stones from his path, muttering to himself, and stomped so the ground trembled beneath his mighty feet. Animals and birds ran away the moment they saw him coming, his anger like a dark cloud that surrounded him.

He came upon an old monkey who was resting under a tree. Its tail blocked the path.

"Move your tail!" Bheem snapped.

The monkey cracked open an eye to look at him, then closed it again. "I'm resting, Brother." His fur was grey and wispy, his body frail.

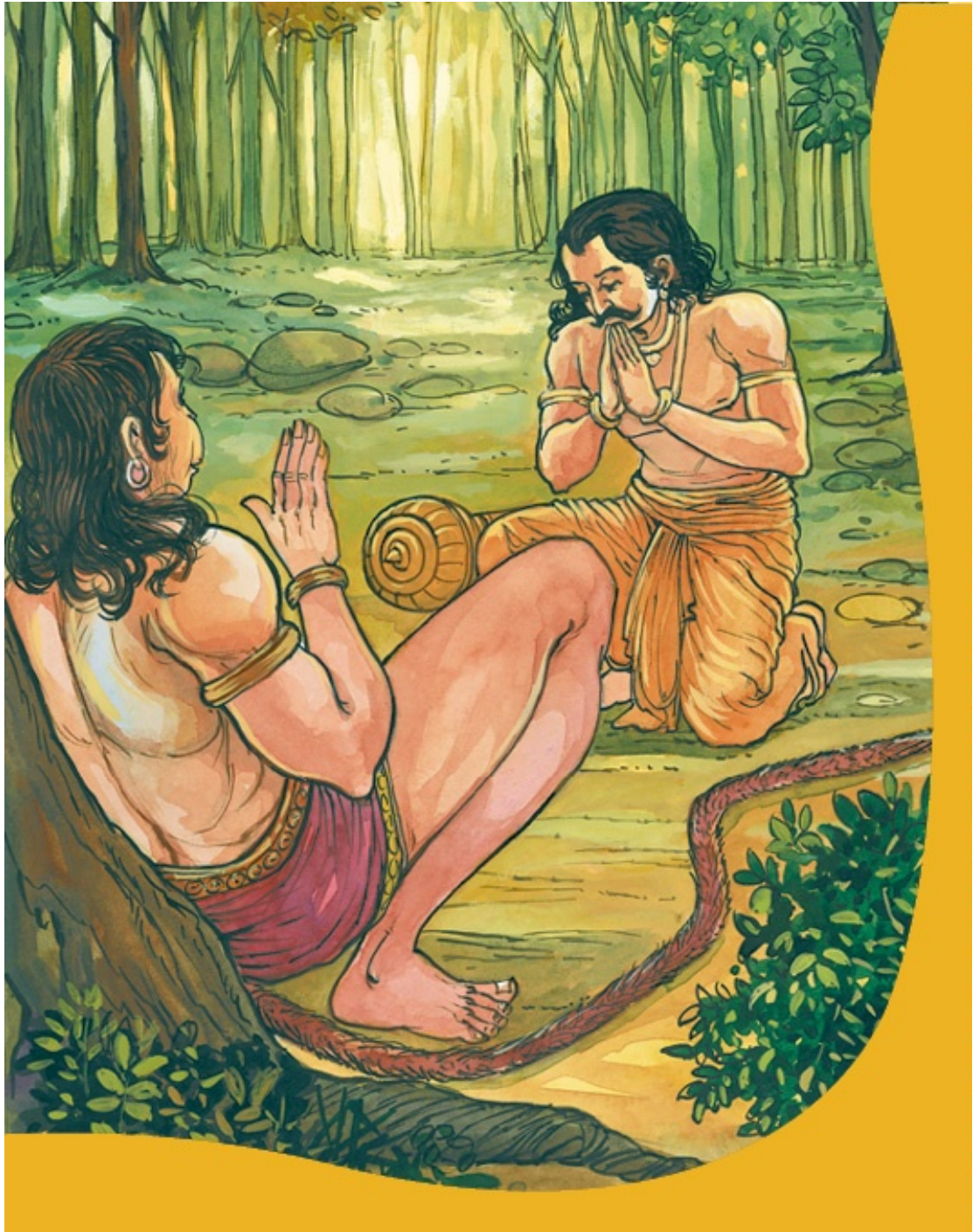
"Move your tail!" Bheem said, aghast that anyone, let alone a monkey, should ignore his command.

"Brother," the monkey said, lazily. "I'm resting. Chant Lord Ram's name and leave me in peace."

"If you don't move your tail then I'll move it for you!"

"You may try that, if you like."

Bheem ground his teeth and reached down to grab the tail. He pulled at it, thinking he would fling the monkey far away. Except that the tail didn't budge. He pulled again, using both hands but it wouldn't move. Bheem heaved and heaved, sweat pouring off him. The monkey's tail was immovable.



Bheem looked down at it. It felt like iron in his hands, even though it was soft and warm. This was no ordinary tail and this was no ordinary monkey. “Who are you?” he asked, letting go.

“Just a devotee of Lord Ram,” the monkey said. “Move my tail and carry on.”

Bheem shook his head. “I cannot move your tail. You are Hanuman, the divine monkey Lord, who fought great demons like Ravan and Kumbhakarn.”

The monkey leaped to his feet. In a moment he was a giant, his grey fur changed to golden, his frail body powerful enough to eclipse the sun. "Glory to Lord Ram!" he cried, and Bheem sank to his knees, awed.

In a moment, Hanuman shrank to match Bheem's size. "Of course I am Hanuman, why else would I keep calling you brother?" he said. They were both sons of Vayu, the wind *devata*, but Bheem had never met his divine brother before. He touched his forehead to Hanuman's feet.

"I came here today because you needed to know this lesson," Hanuman said, helping Bheem to his feet. "Just because you have strength does not mean you should use it at every opportunity. You tried to move me from your path but you didn't consider if it was proper to impose your will on me. Nor did you consider if there might be another reason I was lying here. You trusted only what you saw but didn't consider that there might be some hidden meaning. You must see with more than your eyes, little brother. You must see with your heart and your conscience."

Bheem bowed his head, acknowledging his fault.

"If you have strength then you must use it wisely," Hanuman said. "That is the responsibility of the strong. And strength is not just physical. Strength is of the mind. Strength is of the heart. You must be strong in all these ways if you are to defend dharma, little brother."

"Forgive me, Elder Brother," Bheem said. "You are Lord Shiv's incarnation and you are divine. Forgive me for my offense."

"If I did not forgive you, I would not be here teaching you," Hanuman said, putting his hand on Bheem's shoulder. "A war is coming and you need this lesson to win it."

"You will join us, will you not?" Bheem asked.

"My days of fighting are over but I will be in your camp, Bheem. When you reach Kurukshetra, I will sit within Arjun's battle flag." Hanuman embraced him. "My blessings are always with you. And remember: Where there is dharma, there is Krishna. And where there is Krishna, there is victory."

Far away, in a desert empty of all humans, Arjun focused his consciousness on

Shiv. He sat for weeks and months and years, meditating on the Supreme Lord. He ate only fruit, then only nuts, then only air. Arjun felt his awareness rising upwards, joining with the universe, slipping into the divine unity of the world. He breathed Shiv Shiv Shiv with every intake of air. He felt the eternal dance of Shiv as Nataraj in every atom of his body, the energy of creation and destruction encompassed in that dance.

It was as Arjun was thus seated in meditation that an arrow whizzed past his face. Startled, he leaped to his feet to see a hunter charging down upon him. Arjun seized his *gandiv* and quiver and rained arrows on the hunter. To his astonishment, the hunter rained arrows back, his skill matching Arjun's. They fought, both fierce and deadly, and Arjun was amazed to see such valor from a simple forest hunter. Then, before his very eyes, the hunter sent an arrow that coiled around Arjun's quiver and stole it from him! Arjun watched as his arrow-filled quiver flew through the air and landed at the hunter's feet.

He knew then that this was no ordinary mortal. Arjun dropped his weapons and fell to his knees. "Lord Shiv, forgive me for fighting you!"

The hunter changed form. Amidst the bright white light surrounding him, Lord Shiv was fair in color, his powerful body adorned in the deer skin of a Himalayan ascetic. He wore his light brown hair in matted locks coiled around his head as a yogi. Upon his brow was the crescent moon, like the jewel in a king's crown. In his right hand he carried the trident and he held his left hand up in blessing. "How did you know it was me?" he asked Arjun.

"Because I was meditating on you."

Shiv smiled. "I wished to test you and you have pleased me. Ask me for a boon, Arjun."

Arjun remained at the Lord's feet, bathing in his light. "Eternal Lord of the World, Nataraj, Yogishwar! I am your devotee. Out of love for your creation and for the preservation of dharma on earth, I ask for the divine weapons."

Shiv nodded. "You are Krishna's friend and Krishna's friend is my friend. Therefore I grant you my own *Pashupatastra*." He raised his hand and a lightning bolt appeared between his fingers. It crackled and flamed and Arjun watched it cool into a metal rod. Shiv handed it to Arjun, who received it with both hands.

Shiv taught Arjun the mantras with which to command *Pashupatastra*. He taught Arjun its speeds, its energy, how to stop its flight and how to change its direction. He taught him all the secrets of this most infallible weapon that Bheeshma also possessed.

The Lord then gave Arjun instructions on how to ascend to the celestial realm. "Indra awaits you there with the rest of the divine arsenal."

Shiv disappeared and Arjun followed his orders to the celestial realm. Indra embraced Arjun and brought him to each of the *devatas* to receive their weapons. They gave him powers that made him invisible, that let him fly, that put his enemies to sleep. They gave weapons that did such wondrous things, Arjun trembled to receive them.

"I cannot give you my own *Shakti*," Indra told Arjun. "That weapon is so potent that only one mortal may possess it and I have already bestowed it upon Karn."

Arjun gaped at his father. "You gave my mortal enemy *Shakti*? A weapon so potent that none other could possess it?! Lord?" he said belatedly, remembering that he was talking to the king of the *devatas*.

Indra sighed. "I had to. I asked him for the divine armor and earrings he was born with. Bound by his vow of generosity, he gave them to me by cutting them from his own body. Be careful of fighting him, Arjun. He is a worthy adversary for you."

"He is a scoundrel who abused my wife!" Arjun spat. "I will kill him and wipe away the injury done to her."

Indra tilted his head. "I cannot argue with you on that matter. Now there is only one weapon left for you to master: Art."

Arjun paused. "Art? Art is a divine weapon?" His voice clearly showed his disbelief.

"Art is the most lethal of all divine weapons, my son," Indra said calmly. "It is also the most righteous. With art, you can destroy your enemy without even shedding his blood. Music can turn men's hearts. Dance can turn their minds. Words can turn their souls. You can win wars and all with only art as your

weapon. Learn to respect it, Arjun.”

“Forgive me, Lord. I am ignorant. How do I learn this divine art?”

“Go to Chitrasen, the celestial master. He will be your guru.”

Arjun surrendered himself to Lord Chitrasen and learned there, from the master of art, the most divine weapon of all.

Upon completion of his study, Arjun returned to earth and was welcomed by his brothers and Draupadi. In the years since he’d gone, they’d traveled from place to place in the forest, seeking holy sites and holy rivers, all so their minds would not dwell on Arjun’s absence. Now that he was returned to them, they felt as if their hearts were complete.

In Hastinapur, when Dhritarashtra’s spies told him that Arjun had returned, having obtained all divine weapons, Dhritarashtra was filled with fear. The only way to defeat the Pandavas now would be to find them during their time incognito and send them back into exile for another thirteen years.



43. Dharmaraj

Their twelve years in the forest were almost finished. They traveled deep into the wilderness with Sage Dhaumya, considering what disguises would suit them.

Draupadi became tired and thirsty so Nakul climbed a tree to see if water was close by. “There’s a crane flying some distance away,” he said, pointing south. “There must be water there.”

“I’ll get some,” Sahadev said.

“Be careful,” Draupadi added, worried. “We’re in such a desolate place, my lord.”

Sahadev assured her that he would be careful and went off.

The Pandavas waited but Sahadev didn’t return. Draupadi picked at her sari’s edge, making the threads fray. Nakul went to find Sahadev but did not return either. Arjun went after the twins. He did not return.

Draupadi was now wringing her hands and Yudhishtir was pacing. “Go after them, Bheem,” he said. “And be careful!”

Bheem shouldered his mace and followed them. He did not return.

Yudhishthir helped Draupadi and Dhaumya climb the tree. “Stay out of sight,” he told them. “I will find my brothers and return.”

Draupadi caught his hand, her lotus eyes dark with fear. “What shall we do if you don’t?”

Yudhishthir’s face tightened. “Pray to Krishna.” With Draupadi chanting Krishna’s name behind him, Yudhishthir followed his brothers’ tracks through the deserted wilderness.

The ground was dry and thorny, the trees dying, but then an oasis opened before him. It was a stunning lake, so blue and clear that it appeared to merge with the sky. The lakeshore was green and lush.

Yudhishthir walked through long grass, feeling it slide around his waist. Then he saw his brothers. All four were lying on the lakeshore, unmoving.

Yudhishthir’s heart stopped in his chest. He ran forward and fell on them, checking for signs of life. They weren’t breathing. He shook them, slapped their faces, shouted at them to wake up. He would do anything if they just woke up! But his mighty brothers, invincible and undefeated, were dead.

Oh Krishna! Yudhishthir thought. *How could this have happened? Is this some treachery of the Kauravas?* Yudhishthir saw no wounds so they’d not fought a foe, nor were there signs of poisoning so it could not have been the lake water. There were only five tracks, including his own. There were no signs of battle, of ambush. So what happened?

The only answer was the lake. Whether poison or foe, it didn’t matter. There could be no life for Yudhishthir without his brothers. He cupped the water in his hands and leaned down to drink.

“Stop!”

Yudhishthir jerked. He saw a crane flying above the lake. “Who are you?” he asked.

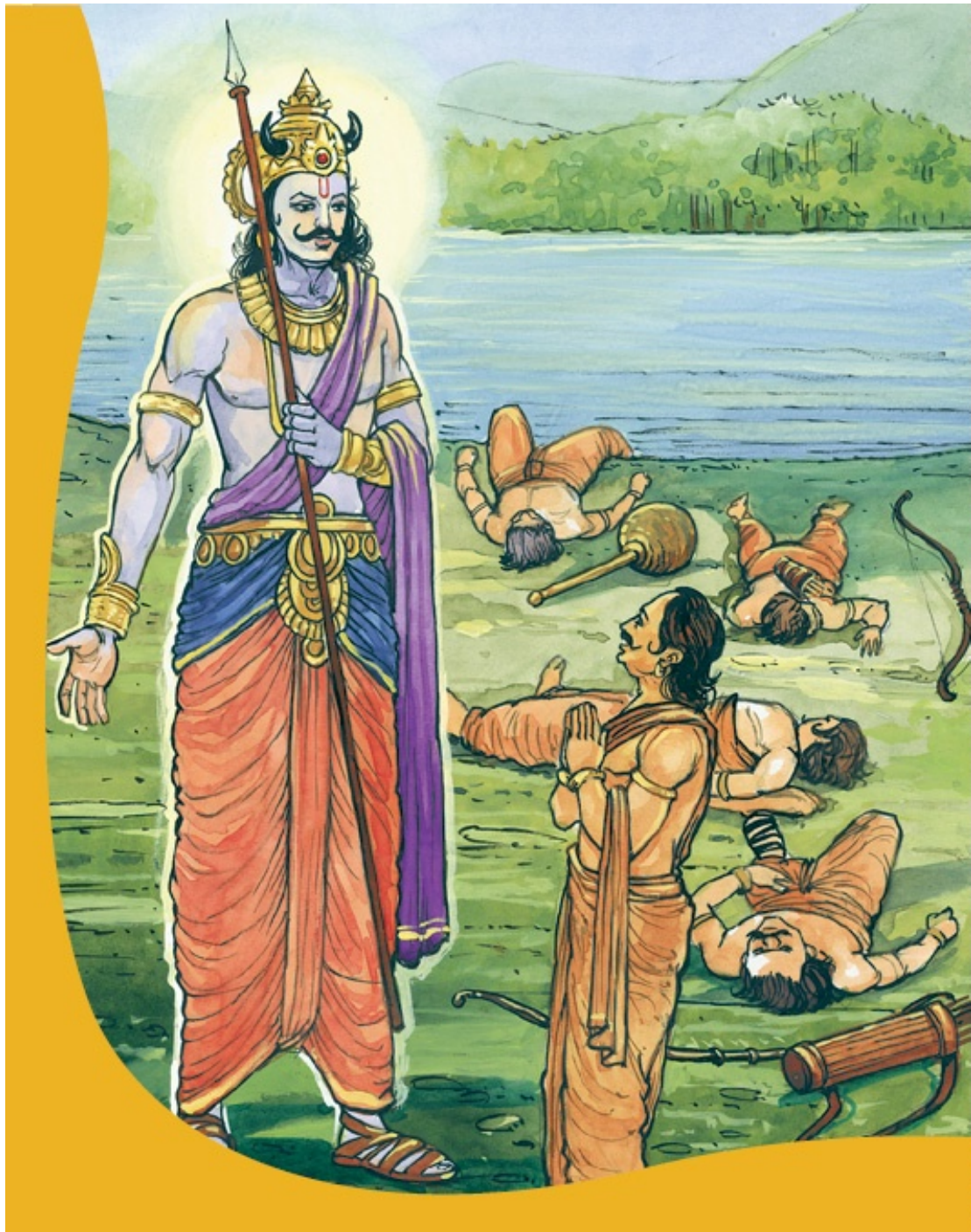
“I am the owner of this lake. I have killed your brothers.”

“A simple crane could not have killed my brothers. Are you a *devata* or a *rakshas*?”

The bird landed on the branch of a tree. His form changed to a celestial with large eyes and long legs that dipped into the lake water. "I am Yaksha."

Yudhishtir recognized the name. "But why would a celestial being kill my brothers?"

"This is my lake. I told them they couldn't drink until they'd answered my questions but they didn't listen to me."



Yudhishthir looked at the water cupped in his hands. He thought of his brothers, their lives ended so needlessly. He thought of Draupadi waiting for him. “How many questions do you have?”

“Many. I have waited years for someone to answer them.”

Then many had died having drunk from this lake, Yudhishthir thought. He let the water fall through his fingers. “I will answer your questions.”

“Do you think you can, Dharmaraj? I know you are the son of Kunti who lost his kingdom in a dice match.” Yaksha’s voice was scornful.

Yudhishtir closed his eyes. He had shamed his mother with his actions. “I will try.”

“Then what is heavier than the earth? Higher than the heavens? Swifter than the wind? More plentiful than grass?”

Yudhishtir thought of Kunti and Pandu, who’d borne such suffering and taught such wisdom so their sons might serve the people. “A mother is heavier than the earth and a father is higher than the sky. The mind is swifter than the wind and thoughts are more plentiful than grass.”

“Who is a friend to one nearing death?”

Yudhishtir looked at his brothers, dead too soon. “Charity,” Yudhishtir said.

“What is charity?”

“To be a friend and protector of all creatures is charity.”

“And who is that friend bestowed by God?”

Yudhishtir thought of Draupadi who had stood by his side through everything. “A spouse.”

“What is the most praiseworthy thing? What is the best possession? What is the best gain?”

“Skill is praiseworthy, knowledge is the best possession, and health is the best gain.”

Yaksha swung his legs as he sat in the tree. “What, if controlled, does not lead to regret?”

Yudhishtir thought of his mind’s desire to gamble. “The mind.”

“What, if renounced, makes one agreeable and wealthy and happy and with no regrets?”

“Renounced pride makes one agreeable. Renounced desire makes one wealthy. Renounced greed makes one happy. And renounced anger leads to no regrets.”

“What has covered the world?” Yaksha asked.

“Ignorance.”

“What is the true path and what is laziness towards that path?”

“Dharma is the true path and to not fulfill one’s dharma is laziness towards it.”

“And what is our true dharma?”

Yudhishtir looked down at his beloved Arjun, whose name meant soft-hearted. “Compassion is true dharma.”

“And what is compassion?”

“To wish for the happiness of all.”

“What then is happiness?”

“To be free from debt. To be content.”

“What is contentment?”

Yudhishtir looked down at the grass, thinking of his exile. “Simplicity. Modesty.”

“And what is modesty?”

“To withdraw from deeds that should not be done.” If only he’d withdrawn from gambling, Yudhishtir thought, clenching his teeth.

“Why do people forsake their friends? Why do they fail to reach salvation?”

Yudhishtir remembered Elder Father Dhritarashtra. “People forsake their friends out of greed. They fail to reach salvation because they connect with the world and not the soul.”

“What nation is considered dead?”

“A nation with no leader.” Yudhishtir swallowed. What must Indraprastha be like with the Kauravas leading it?

“Who is an invincible enemy and what is true restraint?”

“Anger is an invincible enemy. True restraint is restraint of the mind.”

“What is honesty and what is dishonesty?”

“Honesty is to wish for the good of all. Dishonesty is cruelty. It is pride.”

“What is pride?”

“To think of oneself as always suffering in life while ignoring the suffering of others.” *Duryodhan is just like that*, Yudhishtir thought.

“What is a true bath and who goes to hell?”

“A true bath cleanses the mind. And a person who never gives, even when he has, that person goes to hell.” Yudhishtir looked at the lake, then at Yaksha, then at his brothers.

“What is envy?”

“Envy is grief of the heart that leads to wickedness.”

“What is wickedness?”

“To slander others,” Yudhishtir said, thinking of how the Kauravas had slandered Draupadi.

“What makes one learned and how does one become wise?”

“Studying the scriptures makes one learned. Serving the elderly makes one wise.”

“How does one recognize a true sage? By his learning and study, or by his birth?”

“Neither. One recognizes a sage only by character. One may have good birth and learning and study and still be wicked due to bad habits. Only character truly denotes an enlightened sage because character leads to good behavior.”

“Do sages hold the complete truth of spirituality?”

“No, because not all sages agree.” Yudhishtir had met many enlightened sages in their travels around the forests. “The complete truth lies in the heart of the individual.”

Yaksha’s face showed disbelief. “You have answered every question! But answer this: What is the greatest astonishment of this world?”

“That’s easy,” Yudhishtir said with a shrug. “People see death everywhere, in every moment, in every direction, and yet still people think that death will not come to them. They think they are immortal. That is the greatest astonishment of the world.”

Yaksha slid down from the tree and swam smoothly through the water towards Yudhishtir. “If you could have one of your brothers back, which would it be?”

“Nakul, who is tall like a *shaal* tree and golden-skinned.”

Yaksha paused in the water. “Why not mighty Bheem or invincible Arjun?”

“Because I have two mothers, Madri and Kunti, and I love them both equally. If Kunti’s eldest son is alive then Madri’s eldest son should also live.”

“And if you could have two brothers back?”

“I would choose my wise and fierce Sahadev, because he is the youngest.”

Yaksha floated in the water. “You have pleased me greatly. I will revive all your brothers!”

Yudhishtir took a deep breath. “Then you cannot be Yaksha, for he does not have the power to give life. Who are you?”

The celestial changed again, becoming huge and powerful. He rose from the water to stand above the lake, his skin burning the water off like a burning ember. His eyes flashed so brightly they blocked out the sun.

“I am Dharmaraj,” he said.

Yudhishtir fell to his knees before his father, the lord of righteousness and truth.

“I came here to see you, my son, after your twelve years of exile. I am most pleased with you. You have risen above the six weaknesses of hunger, thirst, grief, attachment, old age, and death. You have cleansed yourself of all sin and have the five qualities of tranquility, endurance, detachment, patience, and problem-solving. You are worthy of being called Dharmaraj. All your brothers shall live. Ask me for a boon, my son.”

Yudhishtir saw that his brothers were sitting up and looking around in

confusion. “We must spend our thirteenth year in anonymity,” he said to his father. “How will my heroic brothers and famed wife live incognito? Lord, grant us a boon that none of us will be recognized.”

“Go to the kingdom of Matsya and serve as King Viraat’s servants. By my boon, none shall recognize you. Ask me for something else.”

Yudhishtir’s eyes filled with tears. “Lord, please grant that my mind always guard against the weaknesses of my past. May I never commit the same mistakes, and always stay true to charity, truth, and penance! Father, I desire nothing else.”

“I love you, Yudhishtir, and I grant this boon. Go forth and give the people dharma.”

His immense form disappeared and the younger Pandavas were on their feet, staring in awe at where Dharmaraj had been. Yudhishtir ran and embraced them, saying he would explain later. At present they had to take water and return to Panchali with all haste.



44. Incognito

Dhaumya went to Kampilya, having given the Pandavas permission and blessing to head to the kingdom of Matsya. They concealed their famous weapons on the outskirts of the city in a *shami* tree, tying them to strong thick branches. Then, remembering Krishna together, they said farewell.

They each went into the city alone and begged for employment of the virtuous King Viraat, saying that they had experience serving King Yudhishtir of Indraprastha. Yudhishtir became the king's head advisor, Kank. Bheem became the king's head cook, Vallabh. Nakul became the king's head stableman, Granthik. Sahadev became the king's head cowherd, Tantripal. Draupadi became Queen Sudeshna's head maidservant, Sairindhri. And Arjun used the knowledge of art he'd acquired in the celestial realm to become Brihannala, a dancing guru to the king's own daughter, Uttara.

Arjun loved young Uttara as his disciple and daughter. He told her about Arjun's son Abhimanyu who was handsome and powerful and intelligent and Uttara formed a great passion for that prince.

Towards the end of the Pandavas' year incognito, Queen Sudeshna's powerful brother, Keechak, returned from a war campaign. His glance fell upon her maid, Sairindhri, and he desired to be her lover.

When he told her, Draupadi was horrified. "I'm a married woman," she told him. "The mark of marriage is upon my forehead. Please leave me alone."

Keechak still pursued her and even though she told him to leave her be, he tried to grab her. She ran to the king's court for protection but Keechak ran after her. Before King Viraat and the court, Keechak raised his hand and struck Sairindhri for daring to reject him. She cried out and fell to the floor. Keechak kicked her as she lay on the ground and she screamed, clutching her stomach.

The court was aghast. It was against the law for women to be abused. Yet no one said anything. Not even the king. They were all afraid of Keechak because he defended the kingdom with his martial skills.

Yudhishtir was in that court as the king's advisor, Kank. When Keechak struck her, Yudhishtir was about to leap on him and beat him into the ground but he stopped himself. They were only fourteen days from the end of their year incognito. If he fought now then their disguise would be discovered. The Kauravas would hear that the Pandavas were in Matsya. The Pandavas would have to go back into exile. To protect Draupadi now would only harm her later. So Yudhishtir restrained himself, burning with rage.

Draupadi staggered to her feet, dazed from Keechak's blows. Blood fell from her lips. "You are all cowards," she said, her chest heaving as she glared at Kank. She wiped her hand across her mouth, blood smearing over her fingers. "Just because I am a woman, and a servant, you do not care for my honor!" She pointed at the king. "You behave as the king of Hastinapur did when Draupadi was abused right in front of him. But Draupadi proved then that she was not defenseless and I will prove it too. Keechak!" she said, rounding on that man. "You'll not live beyond tomorrow's sunrise!"

The court was silent as Keechak laughed at her. She was about to scream more threats when Kank stood.

"Sairindhri, it's true that the honor of all ladies should be protected." He stepped between her and Keechak, shielding her. "It is also true that evil men reap the consequences of their actions. Therefore, it is prudent to let the law of *karm* work. Go now to serve the queen for did she not send you to the kitchen for sweets?"

Draupadi blinked, understanding him, yet still filled with fury. She stormed out of the court as Keechak laughed. Draupadi went to the kitchen where Bheem served as Vallabh the cook. She waited for him to be alone and then entered.

He saw her blood. "What happened?" he cried.

"That evil Keechak!" she said bitterly. She bowed her head. "Tell me something, son of Kunti. Why should I go on living if living is like this? Am I an object for men to abuse? When will my own husbands defend me? When will I have justice?"

He cupped her face tenderly with his big hands, heartbreak in his eyes. "You are beloved to us and you will have justice, Panchali. I swear it to you." He embraced her gently as she wept, stroking her hair. "Tell Keechak that you will meet him in the dancing hall when everyone has gone to sleep," Bheem told her. "I'll punish him there while Arjun plays music so that none hear our battle."

In the morning, Keechak's dead body was discovered in the dancing hall. Sairindhri smiled for the first time since she'd been assaulted. Her husbands had defended her.

In Hastinapur, the Kauravas and Dhritarashtra were frantically searching for the Pandavas. They'd sent out so many spies but heard no word. Then Duryodhan's friend, King Susharma of Trigarta brought the news that Keechak was dead. Susharma's kingdom was next to Matsya and he'd long coveted the cows and grain of Matsya's abundant land. "Now is the time to invade," he told Duryodhan. "Their defenses will be in disarray. We can take the wealth of Viraat!"

Duryodhan was distracted from the search for the Pandavas and devised a strategy with Susharma to make the elders agree to the invasion. Duryodhan told the court about his concern for Matsya. "Now that Keechak is murdered, Matsya has no defense and will be seized by unscrupulous kings. Therefore, we should take our army and bring Matsya's wealth under Hastinapur's protection."

Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, and Vidur didn't like it. Matsya had sent no call for

help, and without one it would appear to the world that Hastinapur was annexing that kingdom. Dhritarashtra, however, agreed with his son. He ordered the army to go to Matsya with Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa as its commanders with Duryodhan, Karn, and Dushasan.

Duryodhan sent word to Susharma. They would attack simultaneously.

Susharma's army arrived at the city borders first. King Viraat made ready for battle, calling all men to the walls, throwing on armor, saddling all horses.

Kank persuaded the king to allow himself, Vallabh, Granthik, and Tantripal to fight. "We were all trained as warriors in Indraprastha."

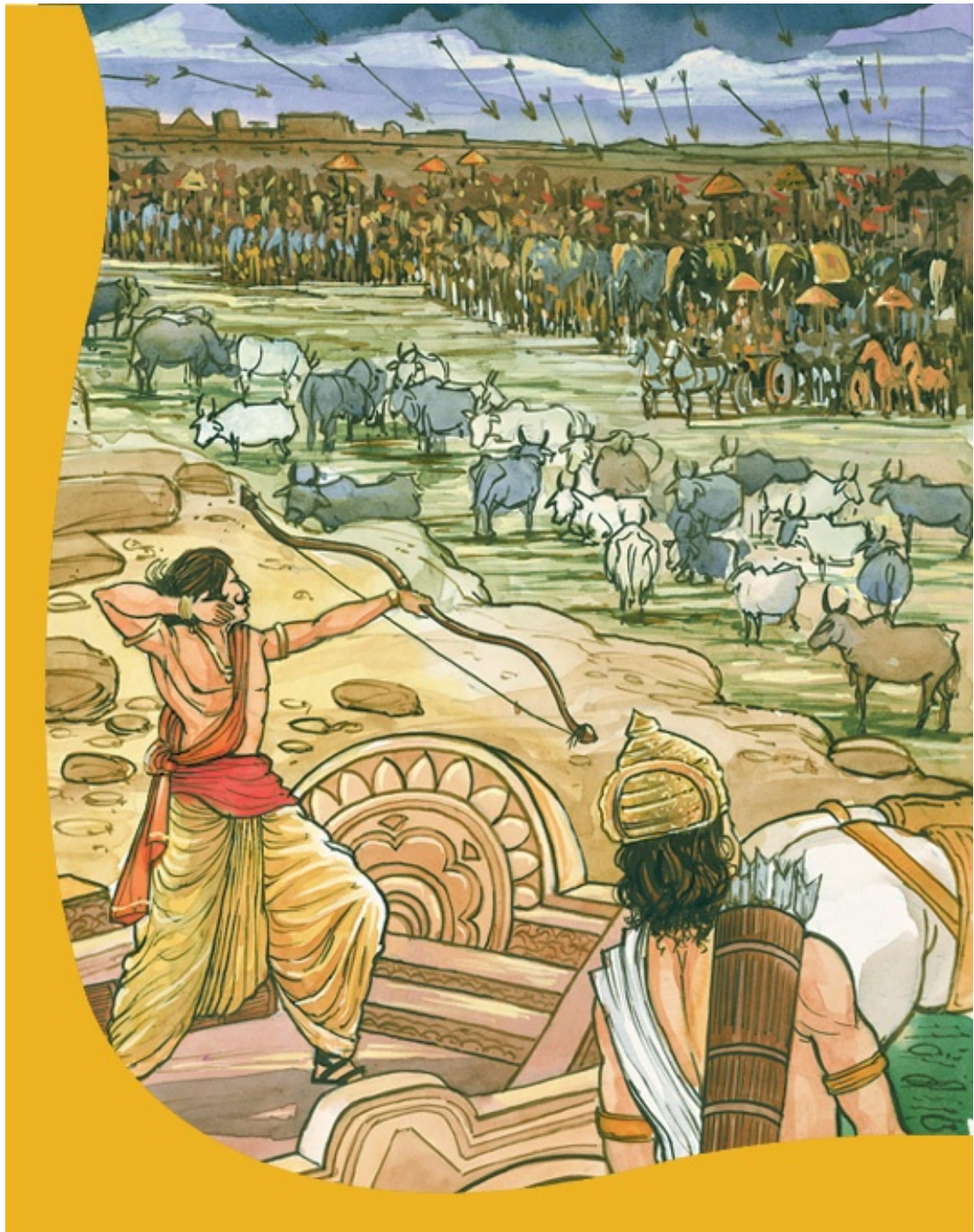
They faced Trigarta's army and with the four Pandava brothers, Viraat easily beat back Susharma's forces. Susharma, however, managed to wound Viraat with a well-placed arrow.

"Vallabh! "Kank shouted, rushing to the king's chariot to defend him. "Take Susharma prisoner!"

Vallabh ran through the soldiers, felling every man but being careful to conceal his great strength, lest he be recognized. He leaped onto Susharma's chariot and disarmed him, then held a sword to his neck. Susharma's men froze.

The war was over and won. On Kank's advice, Viraat forgave Susharma and ordered the enemy to be stripped of armor, weapons, horses, chariots, elephants, and provisions. They were driven like cattle towards Trigarta, bound by vows to never again attack Matsya.

However, Hastinapur's army was even then seizing Matsya's cows on the opposite side of the kingdom. Those cows were being driven with great speed over the vast grain fields.



Word of the disaster came to the city where Prince Uttara, the king's son and heir, was holding the capital. With his father and the army absent, teenaged Uttara put on his armor and resolved to face the warriors of Hastinapur by himself. On Sairindhri's advice, he took Brihannala with him as charioteer.

By the Pandavas' calculations, their year incognito had ended the day before. Arjun could reveal himself but preferred not to lest Duryodhan lie about the

dates. Still, it was his dharma to defend Matsya as Matsya had sheltered them in their time of need.

When Uttar saw the army of Hastinapur that was like an ocean, he dropped his weapons and ran in terror. Brihannala caught him and took the prince to the *shami* tree outside the city. They brought down the Pandavas' weapons. Uttar turned pale, realizing that some great secret was being revealed. "Arjun?" he asked in disbelief, when Brihannala lifted the celestial *gandiv* bow and strung it.

Arjun nodded, with no other choice, and made Uttar his charioteer. The cows were in the center of the battlefield and Arjun had no time to lose. To observe the rules of announcing his presence, he pulled the string of his mighty bow back and released it, letting the famed thunderous sound echo throughout the battlefield.

The Kauravas were stunned. Taking advantage of their surprise, Arjun rained arrows like lightning on the enemy. He broke the bowstrings of Karn, Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, and Duryodhan. He knocked Shakuni and Dushasan unconscious and used a divine weapon to rain a sleeping formula on everyone else. The army of Hastinapur dropped to the ground and Arjun and Uttar herded the cows back behind Matsya's lines of defense. The animals were not asleep for Arjun had protected them with the correct mantra. Arjun and Uttar returned to Hastinapur's unconscious army. "Set their horses and elephants free," he told Uttar who obeyed and Arjun herded those animals to Matsya also. Arjun then shot a fire arrow that created a wide boundary between them and the enemy. The soldiers of Hastinapur woke from the smoke and ran, fleeing Matsya.

Brihannala and Uttar returned to the city at the same time as Viraat. Father and son embraced and Viraat asked how Uttar had defeated such an army all by himself.

Uttar looked at Brihannala. "A *Gandharva* came to my aid, father," he told the king. "He made me his charioteer and fought the enemy himself. He went away as soon as the battle was over and I returned with Brihannala."

Viraat was amazed and said prayers of gratitude to the Almighty.

The land of Matsya celebrated their victory all nightlong and in the morning,

the Pandavas revealed their identity to Viraat.

The elder king almost collapsed with shock. “Yudhishtir!” he cried, staring at Kank. He looked upon the younger Pandavas, wondering how he’d not seen it before. And Sairindhri! That must be Draupadi, he realized, and felt even greater shame. “What can I do to repent?” he asked the Pandavas. “I’m guilty.”

Yudhishtir shook his head. “You’re our friend for you have sheltered us.”

Arjun smiled. “Let us now be family. Your daughter is my daughter because she is my disciple. I would like for her to marry my son, Abhimanyu, and be my daughter-in-law also.”

Viraat eagerly agreed and Uttara was overjoyed. The marriage date was fixed.



45. The Highest Love

The Pandavas sent invitations to all their family and friends and allies across the land. They even sent invitations to their relatives in Hastinapur.

Bheeshma advised Dhritarashtra not to go. “For the first time in years the Pandavas have something to celebrate,” Bheeshma said. “Let us not spoil it.” Vidur agreed with him and thus Dhritarashtra sent gifts and blessings and did not attend.

Abhimanyu and Uttara were married under the blessing of Krishna himself. Draupadi and Subhadra were so happy to have a daughter-in-law.

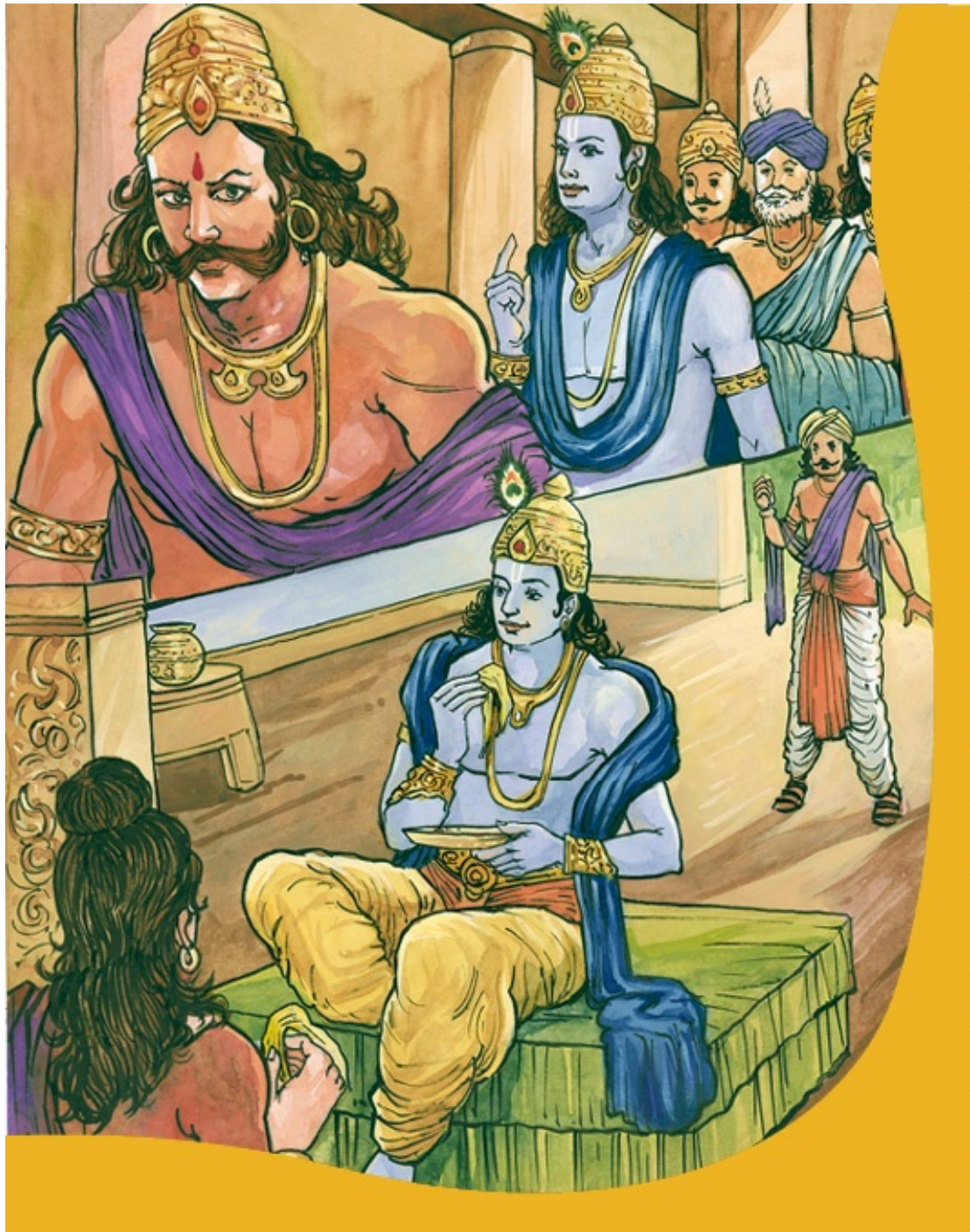
After the wedding, all the Pandavas’ guests gathered together in Viraat’s court. Krishna stood. “My dear friends,” he addressed them, “we all know of the great injuries that have been done to the Pandavas by the Kauravas. They used loaded dice to cheat the Pandavas of their wealth and abused Draupadi with ghastly acts. In addition, the Kauravas sent the Pandavas into exile and made them live incognito for an entire year. There is no doubt the Pandavas suffered many indignities during such a time, yet they abided by the rules of the dice match. It is time for Yudhishtir to resume ownership of his kingdom but we do not know what Hastinapur intends. Therefore, it is prudent to send a messenger to Dhritarashtra. Let the messenger go and let us all return home

until more news is provided.”

The guests agreed and as they all left Matsya, King Drupad sent his priest to Hastinapur as Yudhishtir’s messenger. The priest gave Hastinapur’s court a respectful but firm message that the Pandavas had abided by the rules and now expected their kingdom returned. Dhritarashtra dispatched Sanjay, his own charioteer, with his reply.

Yudhishtir welcomed him, seating Sanjay beside himself with great respect. The Pandavas were gathered together with their sons and King Viraat’s court.

Sanjay looked pained as he took his seat. “Son of Kunti,” he said, “understand that I am a messenger right now. The words I speak are not my own.”



Yudhishtir knew then that Elder Father Dhritarashtra wished to cheat him. “We all hold you in much esteem for we grew up with you close by and consider you one of our family,” he told Sanjay. “Therefore, speak your message without fear.”

“King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur sends blessings and...hopes you’ll remain happy in Matsya.”

Yudhishtir’s vision went red. He looked down at the marble floor, breathing

deeply to calm himself.

Sanjay returned to Hastinapur and Arjun went to Dwaraka. He was admitted into Krishna's bedchamber and saw that Krishna was sleeping in the noon heat. Arjun also saw that Duryodhan was seated beside Krishna's bed, waiting for Krishna to wake up. Arjun went to stand at Krishna's feet, his hands folded.

Krishna stirred and sat up. He saw Arjun and broke into a smile. "Arjun!"

"I'm here too!" Duryodhan said from the side.

Krishna saw Duryodhan and greeted him. "I presume you are both here to ask me for aid in a war between you?"

"Of course," Duryodhan snapped then remembered he was supposed to be nice. "We are family. My daughter is married to your son."

"The Pandavas are my family also," Krishna said. He swung his feet off the bed and stood up. "You have both come to me and therefore I must help you both. To one side I will give my vast undefeated army. To the other, I will give myself, alone and unarmed for I will not fight in this war. Arjun, you will have first choice since you are younger."

"That's not fair!" Duryodhan said.

"In that gambling hall," Krishna reminded Duryodhan, "Yudhishtir gave you first throw of the dice because you were his younger brother. You took advantage of your age then, didn't you? Well, Arjun," Krishna said, "what do you choose?"

Arjun's gaze was calm. "I don't need your army for I will do the fighting. I choose only you, Krishna, alone and unarmed."

Duryodhan was so happy he almost cheered. Instead, he frowned, pretending to be disappointed. He sighed and said that now he would have to accept the army.

Krishna sent his vast forces with Duryodhan. Then Krishna and Arjun went to Matsya.

"I don't want war," Yudhishtir told him. "Help me, Krishna!"

"I'm here to serve you," Krishna said. "I will go to Hastinapur as your peace messenger."

Yudhishtir thought of that war Narad had predicted so long ago, just after their *Rajsuya yajna*. Vyas had also said there would be terrible destruction. Yudhishtir didn't wish death for his people. "Then go to Hastinapur, Krishna," he said. "My people depend on me and I depend on you."

When Hastinapur heard that Krishna was coming as peace messenger they knew that this was their last chance. They laid flowers on the roads to welcome Giridhar. They burned incense and painted their homes so that all would look beautiful to Govind's eyes.

Dhritarashtra also made preparations. He ordered that the roads for miles were sprinkled with rose water so dust would not stain Krishna's clothes. Banners were flown from every rooftop. Chariots, furnishings, and costly pavilions for dancing and drama were built for Krishna's entertainment. Luxurious guest quarters inlaid with gems and precious metals were prepared in the most beautiful part of the royal palace. Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa were sent to the city gates to receive Krishna while Duryodhan rode out to meet him.

Krishna knew that Dhritarashtra and Duryodhan were trying to bribe him into their camp. He knew that they would never agree to peace. Still, he rode into Hastinapur because Krishna didn't want for people to think the Pandavas had not tried for peace. Krishna also wanted to give the noble souls in Hastinapur some solace. He greeted Bheeshma and Drona, seeing the love and hopelessness in their eyes.

Duryodhan flattered and cajoled, presenting Krishna with precious gems and expensive gifts. He then invited Krishna to a feast in his palace. "I have ordered that sweets and delicacies be prepared for you. And butter! You will think you are back in Nandagaon!" he laughed, as if he knew anything about Nandagaon.

There was no love in Duryodhan's offering, no selfless devotion in his service. It was all bribery. "A man only eats in the house of his friend or the house of his host," Krishna said. "Since you are neither my friend, nor my host, I cannot partake of your feast. I will go to Vidur's house instead." Krishna left

Duryodhan's side, leaving also all those priceless gifts.

Duryodhan had such a temper tantrum that he had to be calmed by Shakuni and Karn.

Meanwhile, Krishna walked through the city, greeting all the pure souls of Hastinapur. Pundits, warriors, merchants and laborers—they all came to him as he walked by, honoring him with flower garlands. "Save us, Lord!" they pleaded, falling at his feet. "Duryodhan will lead us to death!"

Krishna helped each of them rise. "Whether it is peace or war," he told them, "I am always in your hearts. We will build a new Hastinapur that is free of vice and corruption."

He reached Vidur's small modest house. All the lamps were out despite the fact that Vidur was home. He had not been invited to the feast even though he was Duryodhan's uncle. Vidur was shut out of the palace because he dared to speak the truth in court. Krishna banged on the door of the darkened home. "Vidur! Vidur! Open up!"

There was the sound of a scuffle, then the door swung open.

Vidur saw Krishna there, leaning against a marble pillar, his light radiated into the dark evening. "Krishna? Here? But-but it's time for the feast."

"How could I eat with Duryodhan? You knew I would come here to you."

Vidur hadn't known that. How could he have known that Krishna would come to him?

"I'm so hungry, Vidur," Krishna said innocently. "Can we eat soon?"

"Of course!" Hastily, Vidur invited Krishna inside and took him to the inner chamber. He lit lamps, calling for his wife, Bhagyavan.

She was so stunned and delighted to see Krishna that she didn't know what to say. She was about to fetch Kunti who was sleeping but Krishna urged her not to. "Let my aunt sleep for grief is tiring. I will come and see her separately."

Vidur pulled Bhagyavan into the kitchen. "What do we have to eat?"

Her eyes widened. "Nothing. Just some spinach and *roti* and some fruit." They stared at each other, tears filling their eyes.

Vidur shook his head. "We are shamed today. We are defeated."

"Go and sit with him," she said, pushing Vidur out of the kitchen. Bhagyavan cooked the spinach and *roti*, thinking of all the delicacies she might have cooked for the Lord. Rushing to serve the simple meal, she wiped her tears and took the food out to Krishna.

Krishna's serene expression broke into a huge smile. "It smells delicious!" He tucked in with relish and Vidur and Bhagyavan just watched, amazed at Krishna's sweetness. They couldn't understand why he would eat such plain food in their little house when an entire feast had been prepared for him in the palace. "This spinach is the best I've ever had!" Krishna exclaimed, talking with his mouth full. He swallowed. "What did you put in it to make it taste so good? I'll tell Rukmini to learn cooking from you!" He wolfed down another bite.

Bhagyavan thought she would burst from happiness. Lightheaded, she reached for the fruit and peeled a banana to offer Krishna. She gave him the peel and kept the fruit.

Vidur saw the mistake just as Krishna took a bite. "My lord!" he said, trying to take the peel away. Bhagyavan was horrified and tried to take it away also.

Krishna avoided their reach. "No, no, I want this peel." He chewed happily.

"But why?" Vidur asked.

"Because," Krishna took another bite, "it was offered with love."

The couple paused. Then they fell at his feet, surrendering their hearts, minds, and souls. "My Lord," they said in unison. He lifted them up and embraced them. "My friends."



46. Vision

The next day, Krishna arrived in the court of Hastinapur which was a marble structure open to the sky's light. That famed and ancient hall of the Bharat clan was filled with commanders of the army, Pundits of high repute, and merchant and laborer representatives from the vast kingdom. Karn and Shakuni and all the Kauravas were there.

Dushasan came down from his seat and escorted Krishna to his place between Bheeshma and Dhritarashtra.

Vidur introduced their guest to Hastinapur's court. "He who is the most honored Lord of Dwaraka, the defender of dharma around the world, and the slayer of the tyrant Kansa addresses us today. He who is Giridhar of Nandagaon, Govind of the *devatas*, and the most beloved son of Devaki graces Hastinapur with a message of peace! Hear him, O Hastinapur! Hear him, King Dhritarashtra!"

Krishna stood. "I thank Hastinapur for giving me this opportunity to speak. Respected King Dhritarashtra, Lord of the Bharat clan! You are entrusted with Emperor Bharat's ideals and values. Hastinapur's past, present, and future all look to you today to make the right decision. If you fail, they will know that it was *you* who failed them.

“Great King,” Krishna said, his voice soft, “imagine a world in which your nephews and your sons lived in peace. The Bharat clan would be united in friendship. How mighty would be your combined strength!

“Great King, the Pandavas call you Elder Father. For your sake and for the sake of their people, they want peace. They were willing to bear the injuries your sons have done them and have completed the terms of the dice match. Return Indraprastha to Yudhishtir and make peace between the two branches of this glorious Bharat tree.” Krishna sat.

Duryodhan stood, a sneer on his face. “The Pandavas have not abided by the agreement at all. Arjun came out of hiding at the war in Matsya, revealing to all who he was. Therefore they should all go back into exile.”

Krishna looked at the elders. “Do you also say that the Pandavas did not finish their year incognito?”

Kripacharya shook his head. “According to my calculations, the year of anonymity ended before the war at Matsya.”

“Guru Kripa,” Duryodhan snapped. “You bite the hand that feeds you.”

Kripa flushed and Dronacharya stood. “I concur with Kripacharya’s calculations. The Pandavas completed their year incognito in full.”

“Gurudev!” Duryodhan said. “Don’t forget that you are prosperous because my father made you so.”

Drona looked at the king with scorn. “Is this how gurus are treated in this court? With disrespect and back-talking? If so, then I willingly leave.” He strode from the dais.

“Wait!” Bheeshma said. “Learned Drona, do not abandon Hastinapur!”

Drona paused.

“Revered Drona,” Dhritarashtra said, “please do not take my son’s words to heart. He disagrees with you on the matter of dates but that doesn’t mean that he disrespects you. Please sit.”

Drona returned to his seat, his body stiff with tension.

Krishna raised his hands in openness. “Your own honored gurus tell you that

the Pandavas speak true. Return their kingdom to them and return your own land to peace.”

Duryodhan scoffed. “Never! They broke their hiding and should return to the forest. Maybe after another thirteen years we’ll talk about giving them Indraprastha.”

Krishna took a deep breath. “A wise king does not love his son more than his people. That was the example given by Emperor Bharat when he appointed Bhumanyu his heir. King Dhritarashtra, you are descended from that same Emperor Bharat. Remember who you are! You have already indulged Duryodhan to the point of destruction. Do not now push your people off a cliff’s edge just to satisfy his whim.”

“My father is not influenced by such speeches!” Duryodhan announced. “He knows his dharma which is to give the people their rightful heir—me! And I will not give the Pandavas Indraprastha.”

Krishna rose once more and moved to stand beside the throne. “King Dhritarashtra, I have one more proposal from the eldest of the Pandavas to avert war. It is this: Give the Pandavas only five villages—Avisthal, Vrikrastral, Makandi, Varnavat, and one other village of your choosing. If you do this then the Pandavas will relinquish all claim to Indraprastha.”

The elders froze. The courtiers looked at each other in shock, repeating “Five villages!” “Just five villages!” Everyone turned to the throne, hope written on their faces.

“Your Majesty,” Vidur said, “it is a good offer.”

Dhritarashtra opened his mouth but Duryodhan spoke first. “I won’t give the Pandavas even a speck of land.”

Bheeshma squeezed the cushion he sat upon. “At least think about it, Duryodhan!”

“I don’t need to.”

Krishna shook his head in disbelief. “Do you want your mother Gandhari to weep over your dead body, Duryodhan?”

Duryodhan snarled. “How dare you speak of my mother that way? Guards,

take Krishna prisoner!”

The entire court shrank back as the guards came forward.

Krishna drew himself up. “You would order me imprisoned?” he said to Duryodhan. “Me? A peace messenger welcomed by Bheeshma and Drona and honored by the King of Hastinapur himself?”

“Stop this, Duryodhan,” Bheeshma said, his voice urgent.

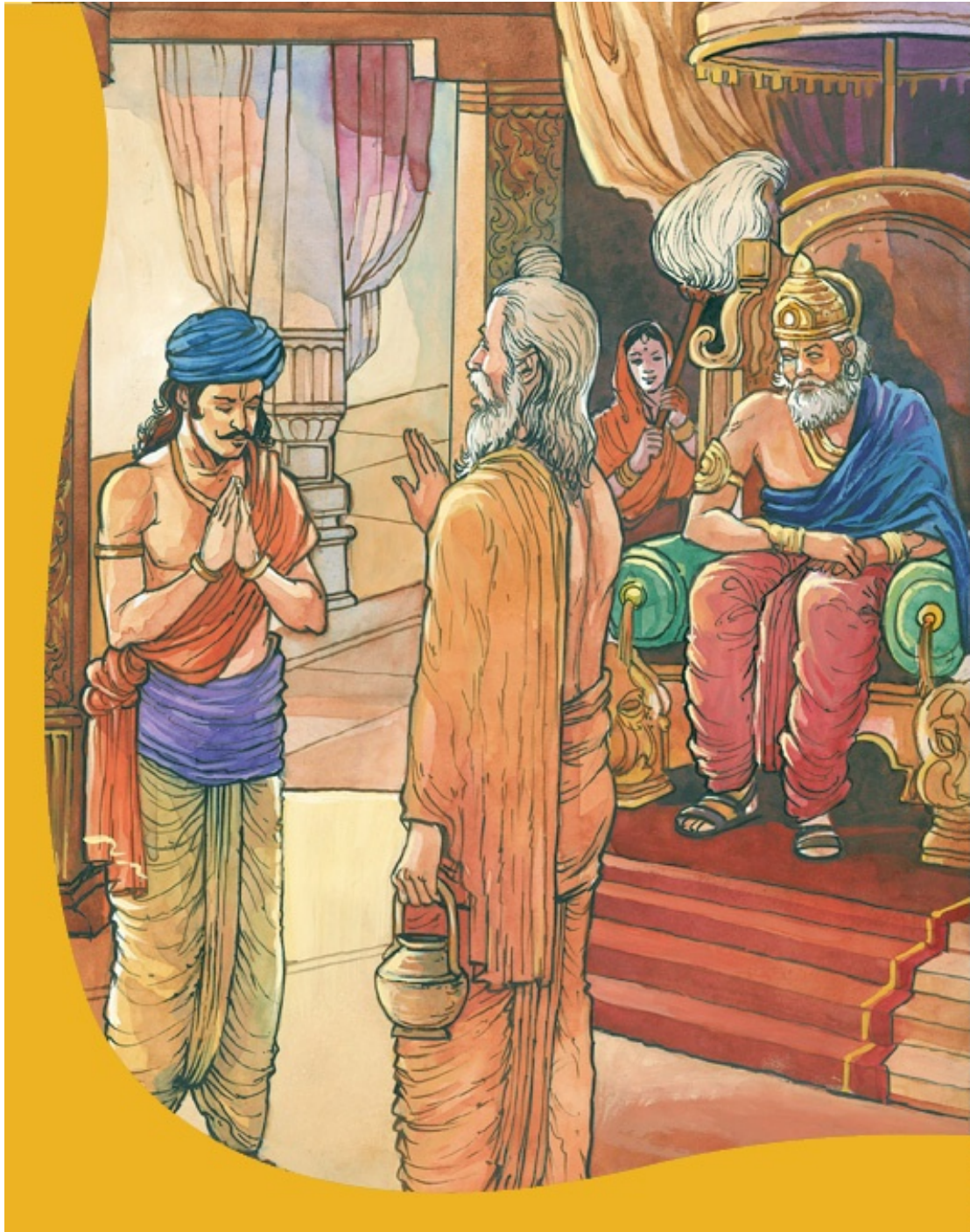
“No! Guards, take him!”

Smiling, Krishna descended the steps. “Yes,” he told the guards. “Come and take me.”

As they approached, their spears pointed at him, Krishna radiated immense light. All covered their eyes and Krishna grew in size until he reached the sky above, his light radiating throughout the entire city. The people in the streets gasped, blinded.

Only four in that court did not cover their eyes. Dhritarashtra was one because he was blind already. Bheeshma, Drona, and Vidur were the other three. They all gazed up at Krishna, their vision clear. They folded their palms, surrendering to the Lord as he granted them this divine vision.

While the court was still straining to see, Krishna left and went to his aunt Kunti in Vidur’s home. “Your sons love you, Aunt. What message will you have me take them?”



She held Krishna's hands and thought of her sons—all six of them. "Tell Yudhishtir," she said, "that the time for which warrior women give birth to warriors has come. Be steadfast." Her eyes filled with tears. "Tell all my sons... Tell them..."

Krishna knew Kunti's heart was breaking over Karn. "I'll tell them, beloved Aunt," he said. "I'll tell *all* your sons how much you love them."

King Dhritarashtra was still recovering from the disaster of Krishna's visit

when Sage Vyas appeared. Dhritarashtra welcomed the sage who had caused his own birth. Loyal Sanjay stood at the king's side, his servant and charioteer.

"Great King," Vyas said. "You know that I have come to advise you. Give the Pandavas five villages and avert war."

"Duryodhan does not wish to do so," Dhritarashtra said.

"Is he king or are you?" Vyas asked. "The wise say that if a limb of the body becomes infected and cannot be healed then it must be cut off. Otherwise it will poison the entire body. Dhritarashtra, cut off this son of yours who brings such poison."

Dhritarashtra jerked. "He is my son!"

"A king is a father to his people, Dhritarashtra. It is your dharma to protect them."

Dhritarashtra was quiet for a long time. Then he whispered: "Duryodhan is my heir."

They were silent for long minutes.

"You have chosen destruction then," Vyas said finally. "You were born blind but nothing is more blind than your actions now, my son. Therefore, I will grant you divine vision."

Dhritarashtra clutched his hands together. "What?"

"Divine vision. You will see the entire war even as you sit here."

Dhritarashtra looked afraid for the first time during their conversation. "I will see?"

"You will see everything that happens on the battlefield."

"But-but-how will I recognize anyone? Great Sage, it is better if you provide Sanjay with this divine vision. He can tell me what happens," Dhritarashtra spoke fast. "I wouldn't even know how to distinguish my sons from my nephews. Truly, Great Sage, I cannot be given this vision. Give it to Sanjay."

Vyas shook his head. "Even now, you cannot face what you have done." He turned to Sanjay. "Are you willing to bear witness for the king?"

Sanjay folded his palms. "I am willing to serve my country in whatever way I can."

Vyas held up his hand and light came from his palm, shooting into Sanjay's eyes. The light was so potent that it illuminated his brow, making his entire countenance effulgent. Sanjay gasped, staying still, absorbing the sage's blessing. The light died out and Sanjay blinked. He gazed around the room as if he'd never seen it before. "Speak faithfully what you see," Vyas said to Sanjay. As he left the chamber he said this to Dhritarashtra: "There is no escaping the truth even if you cannot see it. Krishna is the truth and he is always victorious."



47. The Truth

Krishna left Hastinapur driven by Karn.

“Duryodhan spoke in the heat of the moment,” Karn said, as he held the reins of Krishna’s horses. “He didn’t mean to imprison you.”

Krishna leaned against the chariot rail. He sighed. “Why do you stand with this evil man, Karn? You’re nothing like him.”

Karn clenched his jaw. “Duryodhan stood by me when no one else would.”

“He only did so to take advantage of your skills. How many men have you killed for him? How many lies have you spoken? How many women have you let him abuse?”

Karn’s golden skin turned pale.

“You have traveled far from your guru’s teachings, Karn, because of Duryodhan and because you don’t know who you really are. But I know who you are.”

Karn slowed the horses. “You know?”

They were alone. Krishna had instructed his guards to follow at a distance. “You are the eldest son of Kunti, born as a blessing from Surya. You are Kunti

and Surya's son."

Karn pulled sharply on the reins, hauling the chariot to a stop. "What?" he gasped.

"You are the eldest brother of the Pandavas. You make war on your blood brothers, Karn."

Karn staggered, grabbing the chariot rail to steady himself.

"Your mother wasn't married. How could she keep a child without being disgraced before all of society? She had no choice but to send you away and to this day, she carries a hole in her heart where you belong."

Karn put his hand on his own heart.

"If the Pandavas knew the truth, they would welcome you. They would forgive everything. They would love you, Karn. Leave Duryodhan and come to your real family."

"My real family?" Karn couldn't seem to grasp it. He stood for moments, repeating the words to himself over and over. Then he said: "How could I come to them after I've supported Duryodhan all these years? And after... after what I did to Draupadi?"

Krishna put his hand on Karn's shoulder. "Admitting your fault is the first step to correcting it. Come with me to your brothers. Talk to them. Tell them the truth."

"No!" Karn threw Krishna's hand off. "I cannot go anywhere near Draupadi." He was about to jump off the chariot, then paused. "I don't know what happened to me that day. I lost my mind." Tears rolled down his face. "And even if she forgave me, I could never leave Duryodhan. Duryodhan gave me a place in this world. He gave me everything. I'll never walk away from him."

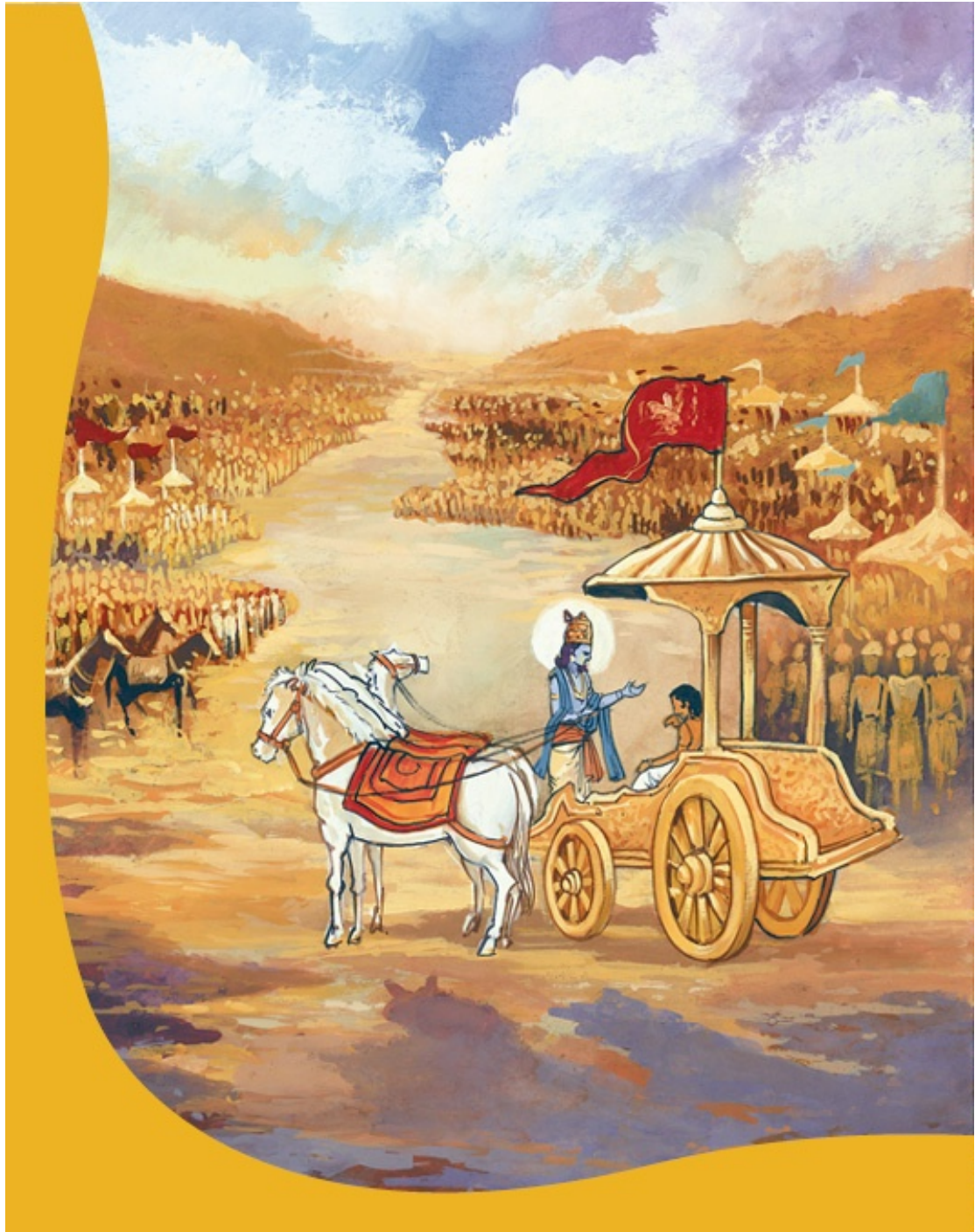
"Then you will die," Krishna said.

Karn nodded. "Either I or Arjun, one of us will die. But don't tell him, Krishna! Don't tell any of my brothers and weaken them as you have weakened me."

Karn returned to Duryodhan and Krishna returned to the Pandavas. Both sides gathered their allies and marched to Kurukshetra, the field of the Kurus.

The night before the war was to begin, all met in Bheeshma's tent. The commanders-in-chief, Bheeshma and Dhrishtadyumna, sat at the head of the gathering.

"There is only one rule and that is to fight according to dharma," Bheeshma said. "Dharma says that war should begin at dawn and end at dusk, signaled by the blowing of the conch shell. No one should fight at night. Only one-on-one fighting at any time - infantry to infantry, cavalry to cavalry, chariot to chariot and so on. Warriors leaving the battlefield to tend their wounds should not be attacked. The unarmed should not be attacked. The unconscious should not be attacked. No one should be attacked from behind. If a woman enters the battlefield then all fighting must stop. Camps should not be attacked. All are free to visit each other's camps at night."



Dhrishtadyumna said: “We promise to follow these rules of war but if any on the Kaurava side breaks them, then no one should blame our actions.”

At dawn, the two armies amassed on Kurukshetra. They appeared as two oceans about to engulf each other. The Kaurava army was eleven million strong. The Pandava army was seven million strong.

Arjun stood on his chariot with Krishna, who was serving as his charioteer. Arjun looked across the vast field of Kurukshetra and saw his elders, his

gurus, his brothers, friends, uncles, sons. “Take me to the center of the field so that I may view both armies equally,” he told Krishna.

Krishna obeyed and pulled the chariot to a stop right between the two oceans.

Arjun found himself surrounded by his family. He imagined them covered in blood, their bodies cold from death, and his hands trembled. The *gandiv* fell from his grip and he cried out: “I cannot fight!”

To convince Arjun to fight, Krishna then narrated the Bhagavad Gita. He explained to Arjun that all those he loved were souls greater than their bodies. As the sun rose and set, so would they all—in accordance with their *karm*—live and die. “You cannot control anyone’s life or death,” Krishna told Arjun, “for their *karm* has already decided it. You can only control your own actions.”

Krishna said that this war was not about a piece of land. It was about the victory of dharma over *adharma*. This war, he told Arjun, was being fought in the human heart. It wasn’t about external foes or a feud between brothers. It was about the struggle between the selfish physical senses and the noble spiritual consciousness. This war was about devotion to God. “You are man,” Krishna said, “and I am the Almighty. There has never been a time when we have not existed together. Again and again, I have descended to earth to teach this same lesson to mankind. This war is about reminding mankind of the truth within them. If you do not fight this war, Arjun, then the world will fall into darkness. Mankind will live in ignorance.”

Arjun then begged Krishna to reveal his divine cosmic form and Krishna granted him that vision. Arjun saw planets, stars, realms within realms. He saw infinite souls passing through the jaws of death and being reborn through Krishna’s cosmic body. He saw all beings dwelling within and coming from Krishna. Arjun saw creation and destruction and knew that the Lord he’d worshipped all his life, who his mother called Giridhar, who he called friend, this Lord was the ultimate reality of life. Everything was for Krishna. Everything was Krishna.

Arjun surrendered himself to the Lord, devoted to Krishna’s will. He took up his *gandiv* and resolved to fight.

Sanjay, relating the Bhagavad Gita to Dhritarashtra, described Arjun’s steadfast heart.

Dhritarashtra then knew that his sons, the Kauravas, would lose. Still, he did nothing to stop the war.

Arjun and Krishna returned to their place within the Pandava ranks and Yudhishtir then stepped down from his chariot. He walked across the field and went to Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa. He asked for permission to fight them and they granted it. "May you be victorious," they all said to him and he returned across the field.

Climbing onto his chariot, he addressed the two oceans. "If there are any on the Pandava side who believe that dharma is with the Kauravas then they may leave us now. And if there are any on the Kaurava side who believe that dharma is in the Pandava camp, they are welcome to join us."

Bheeshma, Drona, and Kripa all remained on the Kaurava side despite knowing the truth.

Vikarna, one of Duryodhan's own Kaurava brothers, also knew the Kauravas were wrong but he couldn't abandon his brother.

Karna was not on the field because Bheeshma banned him from fighting. He still heard the proclamation while in the camp and he did not join the Pandavas.

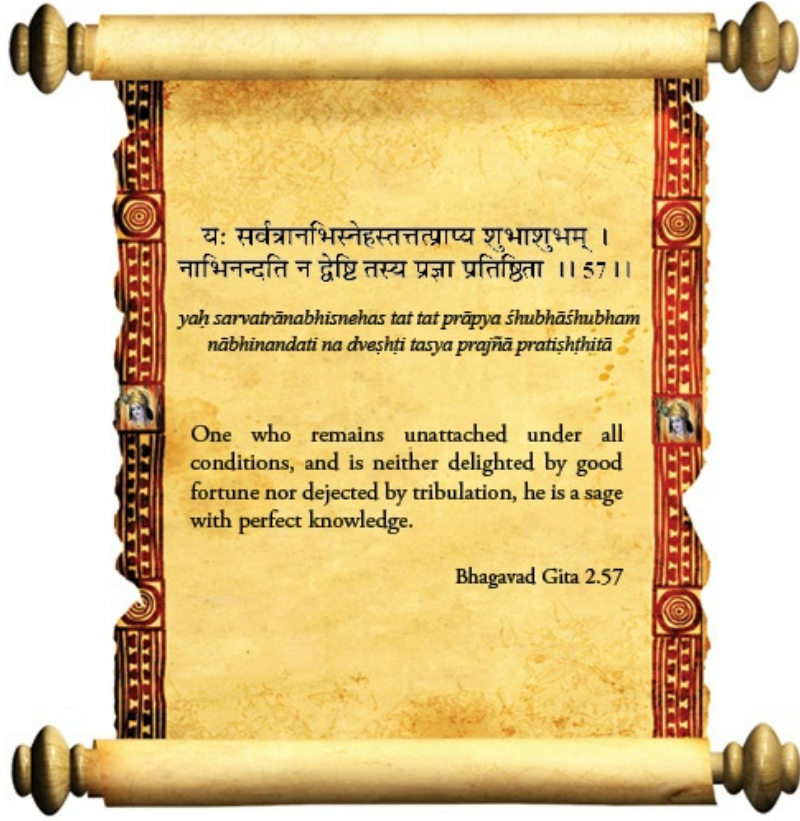
Yuyutsu, a step-brother to the Kauravas, was armored and mounted on his chariot. He was a son of Dhritarashtra also but born of Dhritarashtra's second wife who was a merchant's daughter. As such Yuyutsu had never had much power in his family and he'd never wanted it. He loved his brothers and his father but he was not blind to the truth. Thought the Pandava army was smaller, dharma was in their camp.

In the silence of the field following Yudhishtir's announcement, Yuyutsu spoke to his charioteer. "Take me to Elder Brother Yudhishtir's side."

Yudhishtir watched in wonder as Yuyutsu came towards him. He'd never expected any in the Kaurava camp to respond to his words.

Yuyutsu looked back at his brother just once, seeing Duryodhan's eyes red with rage. He told his charioteer: "Don't stop until we're on dharma's side."

Yuyutsu had no power except to the power to follow his conscience.



यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम् ।
नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ ५७ ॥

*yaḥ sarvatrānabhisnehas tat tat prāpya śubhāśhubham
nābhinandati na dveṣṭi tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*

One who remains unattached under all conditions, and is neither delighted by good fortune nor dejected by tribulation, he is a sage with perfect knowledge.

Bhagavad Gita 2.57



48. Vows

Bheeshma blew his conch shell. All warriors, on both sides, blew their conch shells. They began advancing across Kurukshetra.

Dhritarashtra was sitting in his chamber, listening to Sanjay describe the war. He ordered Sanjay to tell him who fired the first arrow, who struck the first blow.

“The first blow was struck years ago, Your Majesty,” Sanjay said, “when Duryodhan poisoned Bheem. The conspiracy at Varnavat was the next blow. Then when you divided the kingdom and gave the Pandavas Khandav Prastha, it was yet another blow. The dice match was another cruel blow. Your sons’ abuse of Draupadi was the worst blow of all. Then you ordered the second dice match, as if the first was not enough. So why do you ask now who strikes the first blow?”

Dhritarashtra had no answer.

Sanjay watched Kurukshetra with his divine vision. “The war of all wars has begun and Bheeshma’s advance across the field is terrifying to behold. Duryodhan is fighting Drupad, Drona is fighting Bheem and now Arjun is confronting Bheeshma.”

Krishna reined Arjun's chariot directly into Bheeshma's path, so that Arjun could force Bheeshma back with volleys of arrows. They managed to deflect Bheeshma's attack on the Pandava infantry and began pushing against the Kauravas' infantry like the wind blowing back leaves. Arjun shouted and Nakul and Sahadev supported, their cavalry plunging into the fray like thunderstorm clouds.

But Bheeshma rallied his commanders and outmaneuvered Dhrishtadyumna's formation. The Pandavas took many losses and ended the day's war on a dark note.

The days of fighting dragged on. Arjun faced Bheeshma each day but kept thinking that this was his beloved Grandsire.

"Arjun!" Krishna said. "What did I tell you before this war began? Your dharma is to fight any force that supports *adharma*. Bheeshma sides with the Kauravas, abandoning all truth. Fight him!"

Arjun remembered the Bhagavad Gita. "Forgive me, Lord." He renewed his attack, pushing back the Kaurava forces.

Seeing Arjun's prowess, Duryodhan accused Bheeshma of not being loyal to Hastinapur. "You're not fighting to win this war!" he screamed. "You want your precious Pandavas to win." His words so enraged Bheeshma that no one could stop him that day, not even Arjun. He wounded Arjun again and again, until Arjun fell, weak from blood loss. Bheeshma kept raining arrows and Krishna saw that Arjun was in grave danger.

Krishna's eyes turned red. He leaped from the chariot, looking for a weapon. Seeing a discarded wheel before him, he picked it up and spun it about his head, looking like Vishnu spinning the infallible *sudarshan chakra*. Snarling, Krishna ran at Bheeshma to shield Arjun.

Bheeshma dropped his weapons and held his hands up. "Lord, I have waited so long for this day!"

But Arjun managed to stagger after Krishna. He lunged and grabbed Krishna's feet in the dust, stopping Krishna's run. "Lord!" Arjun said. "You vowed not to use weapons in this war!"

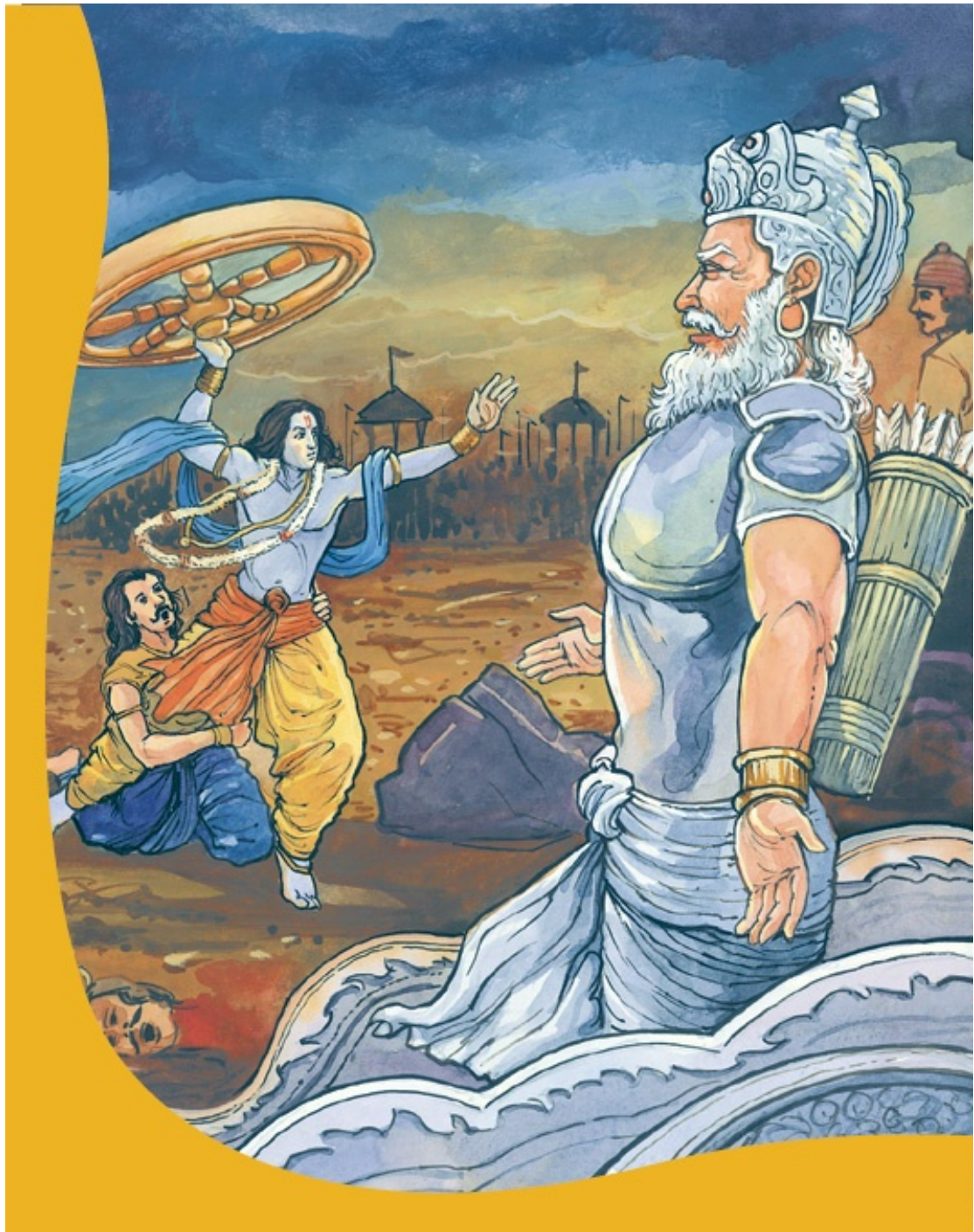
Krishna looked down at Arjun, the spinning wheel slowing in his hands. The red in his eyes dimmed.

“How can you break your vow?” Arjun said.

“To protect you, I will do anything,” Krishna said.

“For me?” Arjun was dazed. “You broke your vow only for me?”

“You stand for dharma as my devotee. To protect dharma,” Krishna said, looking towards Bheeshma, “any vow may be broken.”



Bheeshma felt those words like arrows to his heart. He'd not broken his vows for anything—not to protect dharma, not to protect Amba or Draupadi, not even to protect Hastinapur. He realized that he'd lived his whole life protecting his vows and nothing else. "Why don't you kill me, Krishna?" Bheeshma asked. "If you've already broken your vow then why stop now?"

Krishna threw down the wheel. "Because you are my devotee too."

Bheeshma clutched the rail of his chariot.

“Did you not vow to make me use weapons in this war?” Krishna asked him.

Bheeshma had. When he’d first heard that Krishna would not fight.

“To make your vow true,” Krishna explained, “today, I make my own vow false. That is the power of *bhakti*, son of Ganga.”

As Bheeshma watched, Krishna bore Arjun away to tend his wounds.

The Pandavas continued slogging through the war, until nine grim days passed by. It seemed that Bheeshma had no weaknesses. He was the undefeated disciple of Parashuram, undefeated even by Parashuram himself. Bheeshma also carried the shield of his father’s blessing that he could choose the moment of his own death.

How could they defeat him?

“Didn’t Grandsire Bheeshma bless you with victory?” Krishna said to Yudhishtir. “If he himself is standing in the way of victory then his blessing is of no use. Go and return it. And take Arjun with you.”

Yudhishtir obeyed, pulling Arjun along with him to the Kaurava camp.

Bheeshma was sitting at his prayer altar, chanting Krishna’s name on his meditation beads. He looked up as they entered his tent. “My sons!” He rushed to embrace them. “Where have you been all these days? You haven’t even visited me.”

Yudhishtir clasped his hands together. “We didn’t want to put you in any moral dilemmas, Grandsire.”

“But you know all my blessings are with you?”

Arjun cleared his throat. “We know that. You blessed Elder Brother with victory but if you yourself stand in our way then how can your blessing come true? That’s why Krishna told us to return your blessing.”

“Ohhhh,” Bheeshma said, understanding. “It was *Krishna* who sent you.” He chuckled. “Well, my sons, I never take back something I’ve given away. Therefore, I have no choice but to tell you the secret to defeating me.”

Yudhishtir and Arjun went very still. “The secret?”

Bheeshma shrugged. "As you know I fight according to dharma. If a woman were to come before me on the battlefield then I would drop my weapons immediately. And without my weapons, Arjun could finish me in a moment."

Yudhishthir leaned forward. "A woman?" Bheeshma nodded and Yudhishthir threw up his hands. "But if a woman were on the battlefield then we'd all have to drop our weapons and the whole point would be lost."

Bheeshma laughed. "Yes, that's true. Still, I'm sure Krishna has a solution."

Arjun and Yudhishthir touched Bheeshma's feet in reverence and walked back to their camp. When they told Krishna Bheeshma's words, he said only that Shikhandi would ride in Arjun's chariot the next day.

Draupadi looked up from the side where she was seated. "Elder Brother Shikhandi?"

"Yes."

Draupadi went to her brother's tent, the others following her.

Shikhandi had been born to King Drupad long before Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi were born. Physically male but with a woman's mind, Shikhandi trained every day with single-minded ferocity. Due to his effeminate ways, Shikhandi was known in Panchal as not quite male or female but both.

The guard announced Draupadi and the Pandavas, and Shikhandi stood to welcome them. He flicked his hair over his shoulder. "You wished to see me, little sister?"

Draupadi and the Pandavas touched his feet in respect. "Yes, Elder Brother," she said and after he blessed her with fortune, they sat down together.

Arjun sat on the other side of Shikhandi. "Why does Krishna say you will defeat Bheeshma, Elder Brother-in-law?"

Shikhandi stiffened. "Bheeshma?" He looked towards Krishna who stood in the doorway.

"Tomorrow," Krishna said.

Shikhandi clenched his fists. "Finally!"

Draupadi looked at her husbands in amazement.

“I was not always as I am now,” Shikhandi explained, waving his hand. “I used to be a princess named Amba but Bheeshma disgraced me.” Shikhandi’s voice turned hard. “I was reborn in Panchal to fulfill my vow to destroy him.”

The Pandavas and Draupadi looked at each other with stunned faces. Draupadi took Shikhandi’s hand and held it.

The next day, the tenth day of the war, Shikhandi joined Arjun on his chariot and they confronted Bheeshma. Shikhandi moved to stand in front of Arjun.

Bheeshma looked across the battlefield and met Shikhandi’s gaze. There in Shikhandi’s eyes was Amba. Long moments passed as they stared at each other over the heads of the fighting soldiers. Shikhandi took aim, his hand trembling. Bheeshma threw his own bow down. He threw down his sword, his mace, his spear, his shield. He completely disarmed and stood before Shikhandi, waiting. Still, Shikhandi did not shoot.

“Arjun,” Krishna said. “What are you waiting for?”

Arjun swallowed. “As you wish, Lord.” He set an arrow on his bow and took aim. His fingers tightened on the string. “Krishna... He is my grandsire.”

“He is the commander-in-chief of the enemy army. Attack him now.”

Arjun released his arrow. It shot through the air, multiplying by the force of his mantra, all deadly shafts piercing Bheeshma’s chest. Bheeshma grabbed the flag post, still standing.

“It’s not enough to only wound him, Arjun,” Krishna said. “He must be completely incapacitated or his father’s boon will keep him alive to fight.”

“Yes, Lord,” Arjun said. He released more arrows, all lethal missiles as they hissed through the air towards Bheeshma. They skewered him and Bheeshma’s mouth filled with blood.

Arjun sent a missile to destroy his armor and it tore from Bheeshma’s body, exposing his dripping wounds. Arrows impaled him. Arjun sent more arrows, the power of them making Bheeshma fall from his chariot. Arjun sent arrows even as Bheeshma fell, piercing Bheeshma’s arms and legs, leaving not one part of his body unwounded.

The son of Ganga landed on the barren ground, dust flying up to engulf him. His body rested on the shafts of the very arrows that impaled him. His head dangled in the air.

Arjun's control broke. He leaped from his chariot. "Grandsire!"

As he ran towards Bheeshma's body, word spread like fire that the best of the Bharat clan had fallen. Commanders abandoned their posts, soldiers about to kill each other were suddenly united in grief. Warriors everywhere rushed to where Bheeshma was fallen.

Bheeshma lifted his head. "Arjun, get me something to rest my head upon. And I'm thirsty."

Arjun's tears flowed as he shot three arrows into the ground in a cross to support Bheeshma's head. He shot another arrow into the ground with a mantra and a spring of Ganga water came up from the ground. It dripped into Bheeshma's mouth until his thirst was slaked. Bheeshma opened his eyes and saw his mother beside him.

"My son," Ganga whispered. "It's time for you to come with me now."

"I cannot, Mother," Bheeshma said. "I vowed to father that I wouldn't die until Hastinapur was safe."

"But the pain-"

"What's more pain in a pain-filled life?" Bheeshma said. "I cannot forsake my vow."



ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।
सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥

*dhyāyato viṣhayān puṁsaḥ saṅgas teṣhūpajāyate
saṅgāt sañjāyate kāmaḥ kāmāt krodho 'bhijāyate*

While contemplating on the objects of the
senses, one develops attachment to them.
Attachment leads to desire, and from desire
arises anger.

Bhagavad Gita 2.62



49. To Serve

With Bheeshma eliminated, Duryodhan appointed Drona as the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army.

This brought about a whole new set of worries for the Pandavas. Drona wasn't their Grandsire, he was their Gurudev. He knew all their strengths and weaknesses, for he had taught them what they knew. Drona was also more ruthless than Bheeshma and he determined early that he would take Yudhishtir captive and end the war.

It was Duryodhan who convinced Drona to do this. "With Yudhishtir captive, the Pandavas will lose heart," Duryodhan said to their guru. "We can end this fighting and save our people." On Drona's urging, Duryodhan promised to set Yudhishtir free once the war was over but Duryodhan was lying. He was never going to set Yudhishtir free.

However, as long as Arjun defended Yudhishtir, Drona could not reach him. Two days went by this way.

Then Duryodhan and Dushasan talked to their friend, Susharma, the king of Trigarta. "It's time to get revenge for the war in Matsya," Duryodhan said.

"If you lure Arjuna away then we can capture Yudhishtir," Dushasan

suggested.

Susharma considered it. "I'll do it only if you promise me that you'll set King Yudhishtir free afterwards. He saved my life in the war against Viraat and I owe him."

"Of course," Duryodhan lied again.

Dushasan was worried as they returned to their part of camp. "What will you do afterwards when Susharma expects us to set Yudhishtir free? It's one thing to lie to Gurudev but Susharma's a friend."

"Don't be silly," Duryodhan said. "Susharma will long be dead. Arjun will kill him."

The day's fighting began and Susharma and his brother challenged Arjun, jeering insults at his divine *gandiv* bow. Then they ran off, their chariots clearing a path through the Kaurava forces.

Arjun dug Susharma's arrow out of his armor and threw it down. "Prepare to die!" he shouted at them and told Krishna to give chase.

Bheem cried out to Arjun: "Where are you going? Come back!"

"They've challenged me," Arjun said.

"It's a trick! We have to hold our positions!"

"I won't be gone long," Arjun said. "After them, Krishna!" Krishna obeyed.

Arjun was gone a long time. The brothers of Trigarta led him far away.

Dhrishtadyumna came riding wildly up to Yudhishtir. "It's disaster." Dhrishtadyumna said. "Drona has arranged the *chakravyuh*."

Yudhishtir stared at his brother-in-law. "Only Krishna and Arjun know how to break the wheel formation." They all looked to the eastern horizon, over which Arjun had disappeared with Krishna. "Drona will take me captive," King Yudhishtir said with finality. "Evil Duryodhan will win."

"I know how to break the *chakravyuh*," young Abhimanyu, said.

His elders looked at Arjun's son with disbelief.

“I learned how from Uncle Krishna,” he continued, and their expressions eased. “When I was in my mother’s womb,” he added and they all tensed up again. “It’s true, I swear! I heard how to break in but then my mother fell asleep and Uncle Krishna stopped talking. I didn’t hear how to get out.”

“Then we can stop the *chakravyuh*,” Bheem said. “Breaking out won’t be a problem because we’ll cripple them from the inside. Get ready, son,” he said to Abhimanyu.

Remembering Krishna’s words with precise clarity, Abhimanyu found a weakness in the formation and rained missiles with the exact mantra, blasting the wheel open. Knowing his uncles were behind him, Abhimanyu drove through the breach.

There was a sudden thunder. Abhimanyu turned to see a cavalry charge led by Jayadrath, Duryodhan’s brother-in-law. Bheem tried to push him out of the way so they could reach Abhimanyu, but it was too late. The outer layer closed ranks.

Abhimanyu was alone in that formation. His charioteer was calm, asking if they should break out to rejoin the king but Abhimanyu didn’t know the way out. The defenses were different from this side and the mantras would be different too. Abhimanyu looked around him at the wheel formation, the rotating motion of soldiers in the inner layer stopped by Abhimanyu’s breach. While he was in the *chakra* he could block its advance and save Elder Father Yudhishtir from being captured. And if he reached the innermost layer then he could cripple it entirely! The king would be safe.

Abhimanyu gripped his bow. His dharma was to serve his people.

The Pandavas outside were frantic. Though Jayadrath was weaker, he somehow pushed them back. Even Bheem couldn’t get through. Satyaki, one of Krishna’s friends and a close ally of the Pandavas, attempted to breach the *chakravyuh* from another side. He managed, by sheer force of will, to break one layer but was beaten back before he could enter.

Abhimanyu had been gone for hours yet the *chakravyuh* hadn’t moved so they knew he was still alive and fighting. It was afternoon and Yudhishtir searched the horizon. There was no sign of Arjun.

Dhrishtadyumna's spies sent word that Abhimanyu had breached five layers. If he breached the sixth and the seventh layers then he'd find Drona, Kripa, Ashwatthama, Karn, Duryodhan, Dushasan, and Shakuni in the center.

Yudhishthir prayed that Abhimanyu wouldn't breach the seventh layer. "Stay outside, son!" Yudhishthir said out loud.

Afternoon began to dim into evening and still there was no sign of Arjun!

Even though the *chakravyuh* had been frozen in place, its soldiers continued marching in rotating formation, maintaining their defenses, the crunch of their armor grating on the Pandavas' nerves. For minutes now, the *chakravyuh* had been quiet. The conch shell blew, Drona ending the day's fighting.

The *chakravyuh* began to retreat, its rotating layers scuttling back across the battlefield like a cockroach in the night. There, where the seventh layer had been, was Abhimanyu's body.

"Bheem!" Yudhishthir cried out, staggering, and Bheem ran to hold him up, his own tears falling.

Abhimanyu had reached the center of the formation. He'd fought Drona, Kripa, Ashwatthama, Karn, Duryodhan, Dushasan, and Shakuni. He'd defeated every one of them, keeping them back, destroying their formation from the inside out. That was when they'd come in together, attacking him as one, breaking the rules of war laid down by Bheeshma. They'd murdered Abhimanyu, an eighteen-year-old boy, and then retreated to their camp like cowards.

The Pandavas carried Abhimanyu's body back to camp. Draupadi screamed when she saw what they brought.

Arjun and Krishna drove into a silent camp. Nakul and Sahadev came out of Yudhishthir's tent and their pale faces made Arjun stop in his tracks.

"Guru Drona arranged the *chakravyuh*," Nakul said.

"Abhimanyu knew how to break in but not how to break out," Sahadev said.

"We tried to follow him but..." Nakul couldn't speak anymore.

Arjun grabbed their arms. "But what?" The twins wouldn't answer. Arjun ran into Yudhishtir's tent. Abhimanyu lay under a shroud with Yudhishtir, Draupadi, and Bheem sitting around him.

"No." Arjun strode forward. "Get up, Abhimanyu." When his son didn't rise, Arjun screamed. "Get up!"

Krishna took hold of Arjun's shoulders as Arjun wailed Abhimanyu's name. "I know," Krishna said, his strength keeping Arjun upright. "I know."

Arjun vowed to kill Jayadrath who had prevented help from reaching Abhimanyu. Guru Drona arranged the lotus formation around Jayadrath to protect him and Arjun fought the entire day to smash the formation and kill Jayadrath by sunset. With Jayadrath dead, the Kaurava army was enraged. Drona didn't blow the conch shell even though night fell and the Pandavas faced their enemies in the dark.

That was when Hidimba's son, Ghatotkach, dropped from the sky. Grown to a giant, his demon powers at full strength at night, he crushed the Kaurava flank beneath him. He knocked Duryodhan unconscious, severely wounded Drona, and made their men scream in terror. Drona blew the conch shell to save their army from complete defeat.

The Pandava army was jubilant. Bheem embraced his son and all the family blessed him.

"I know that I'm *rakshas* and not worthy, but I am here to serve you," Ghatotkach said to Yudhishtir.

"You are worthy," Arjun insisted. "You're our eldest son!"

Krishna put his arm around Ghatotkach. "Come, my dear, and I will tell you what is happening." As the two of them walked the quiet battlefield, Krishna told Ghatotkach that Arjun was in grave danger from Karn.

Ghatotkach was aghast. "But Uncle Arjun has the divine weapons."

"There's one divine weapon he doesn't have. *Shakti*. It's infallible and the only person who has it is Karn who can only use it once."

Krishna had been trying to keep Arjun and Karn apart but that was becoming more and more difficult.

“Then we must force Karn to use *Shakti* on someone else,” Ghatotkach decided.

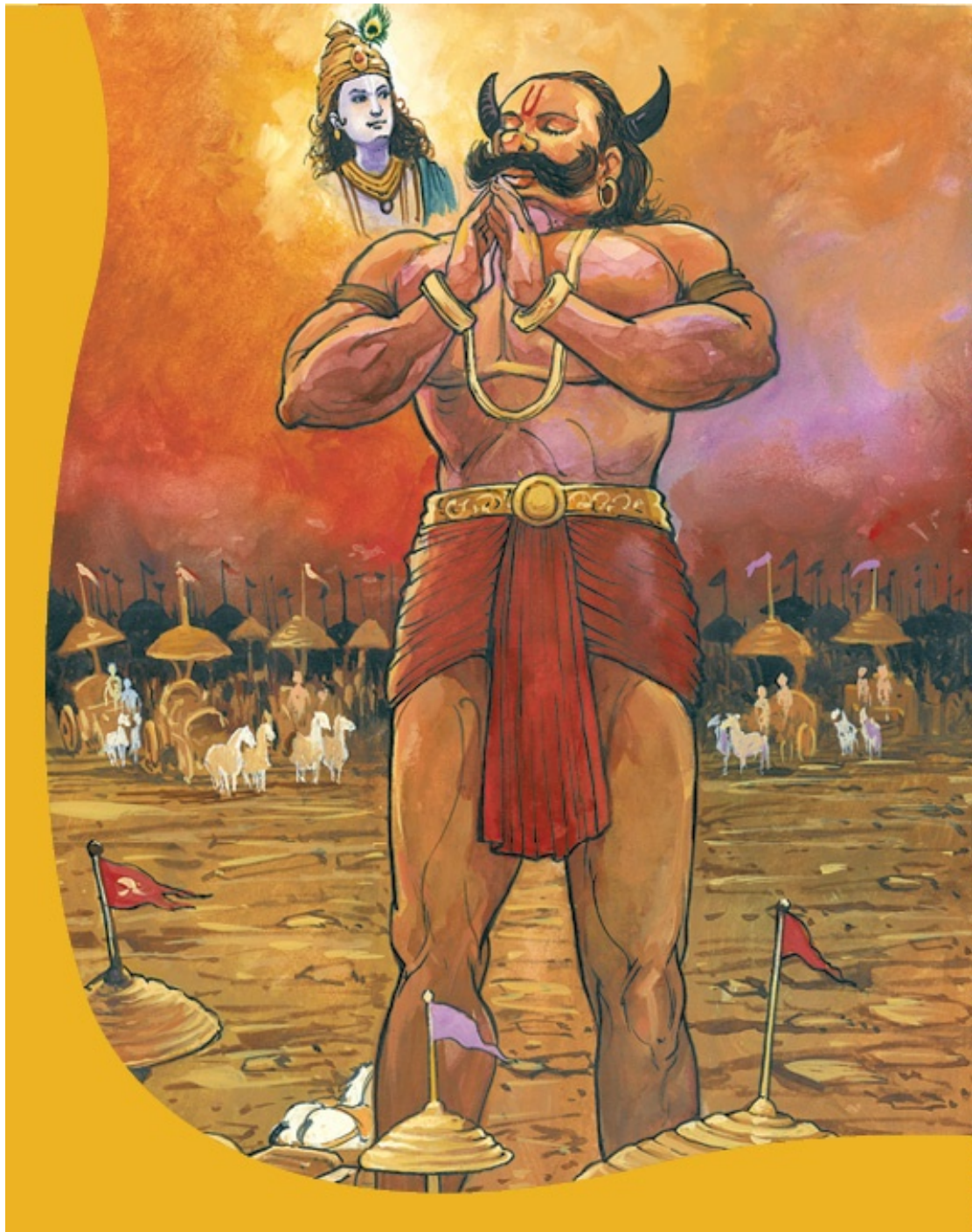
“That won’t be easy,” Krishna said.

Ghatotkach gave a grim smile. “It will be for a *rakshas*.”

The next day Ghatotkach sought Karn on the battlefield.

Duryodhan faced him instead and Ghatotkach beat him badly. He didn’t kill Duryodhan because his father Bheem had vowed to do that. Ghatotkach only beat Duryodhan badly enough to frighten Karn.

Predictably, Karn arrived. Seeing Duryodhan helpless before Bheem’s son, Karn realized he had only one way to stop the demon. He summoned *Shakti*, which appeared like a bolt of lightning in Karn’s hand. It was as long as a spear, white in color, and crackled with pure energy.



Ghatotkach folded his palms, focusing his mind on Krishna. All his life, his father had written Ghatotkach letters about Krishna's grace, Krishna's mercy, Krishna's love. Last night, Ghatotkach had finally met Krishna and knew that his father, Bheem, was right. *Krishna*, Ghatotkach prayed, *I'm rakshas and unworthy of serving you. I'm even unworthy of serving your servant. But if I've fought well today then grant me this one boon, Lord. In my next life, please make me the servant of the servant of your servant.*

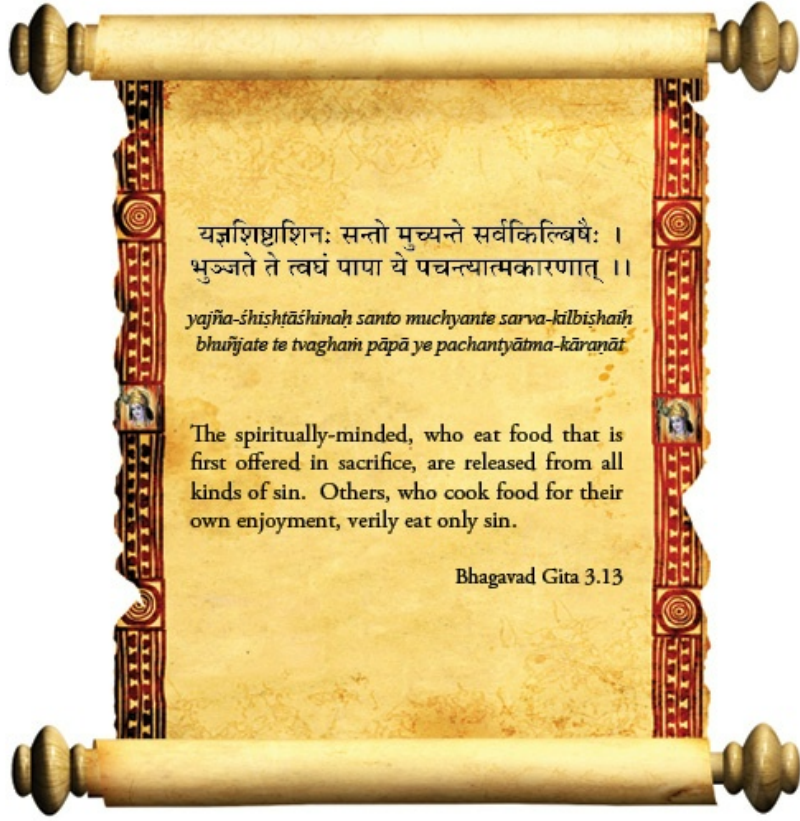
Karn launched his weapon. It hit Ghatotkach in his heart and he screamed.

Bheem was riding hard to the scene and saw that his son was dying. The Kaurava soldiers were smiling, clapping each other on the back, celebrating already. "Increase your size, Ghatotkach," Bheem shouted. "Fall on the enemy!"

Ghatotkach obeyed and crushed a third of the Kaurava army in his death. No one saw how Krishna sent beloved Ghatotkach's soul up to Krishna's own realm.

On the battlefield, Bheem looked at Krishna. "You smile, Krishna? My son is dead and you smile?" he shouted.

Krishna shook his head. "I'm not smiling at his death, Brother Bheem. I'm smiling at his victory. Abhimanyu defended Yudhishtir and saved the day's war. Ghatotkach defended Arjun and won the entire war. Bheem, your mighty son has saved dharma."



यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।
भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥

*yajña-śhiṣṭāśhinaḥ santo muchyante sarva-kilbiṣaiḥ
bhujjate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pachantyātma-kāraṇāt*

The spiritually-minded, who eat food that is first offered in sacrifice, are released from all kinds of sin. Others, who cook food for their own enjoyment, verily eat only sin.

Bhagavad Gita 3.13



50. Consequences

Uttara was brought to the battlefield so that she could be cared for by her elders. She was close to the end of her pregnancy with Abhimanyu's baby.

The Pandava camp was a bleak place. Drona had delivered more blows than the Pandavas knew how to bear. They'd lost not only Abhimanyu and Ghatotkach, but Viraat and Drupad and countless others. Drona had broken the rules and broken the Pandavas' hearts too.

The next day, Drona blasted so many holes in the battlefield that the Pandava army turned tail and fled. The Pandavas managed to rally their men a distance away.

"We need a solution and we need it now," Dhrishtadyumna said.

"Like Bheeshma, Drona can choose the moment of his own death," Krishna said. "So make him not want to live. The most precious thing to Drona is his son. Ashwatthama is the true reason why Drona is fighting for the Kauravas because Ashwatthama is Duryodhan's friend. Convince Drona that Ashwatthama is dead and Drona will give up his life."

Yudhishthir shook his head. "Killing Ashwatthama is no easy task, Krishna! He's almost as powerful as his father and a Pundit too."

"I didn't say kill Ashwatthama. I said convince Drona he's dead."

Yudhishthir went pale. "But that-that would be lying."

"Would it?" Krishna's gaze was steady. "Let me tell you what the truth is, Great King. The truth is whatever is in the best interests of all. If you have to lie to win a righteous war—a war that you did not start—then it is a lie well spoken. Do you not have spies? Do the Kauravas not have spies? Is that not a form of lying? Of course it is! But to win a war without spies is impossible. Thus, to protect dharma and the innocent, a lie can be justified. Your soldiers' lives are in your hands, Great King. Save them!"

Yudhishthir thought of his father, Dharmaraj, who had tested him by the lake. He thought of his father, Pandu, who had always told him that lying was the mark of dishonor. Yudhishthir thought of Grandsire Bheeshma, Guru Drona, Guru Kripa, all of whom had proclaimed him Dharmaraj on earth because of his adherence to the truth. How could he let them down by lying? How could he let his people down by not lying?

Krishna pointed to an elephant on the battlefield. "That animal is named Ashwatthama."

Bheem eyes lit with understanding and he ended its life with one blow to the back of its head. "Forgive me," Bheem whispered to it. He then leaped onto his chariot and drove towards Guru Drona, hollering: "I killed Ashwatthama!"

Krishna turned to Dhrishtadyumna. "Your time has come."

Dhrishtadyumna nodded.

Arjun looked back and forth between them. "What are you talking about?"

"The purpose of my birth from fire," Dhrishtadyumna said. "The consequences of Drona's actions towards my father."

Drona heard Bheem's cheering. "What?" Drona whispered. He abandoned his post despite Duryodhan's yelling and drove straight to Yudhishthir. "Is this true? I know you won't lie to me, Dharmaraj. Is it true that my son is dead?"

Yudhishthir heard Krishna's voice in his head. *The truth is whatever is in the best interests of all.* He forced himself to speak. "Ashwatthama is dead,

whether man or beast.” Krishna caused a sudden gust of wind that obscured Yudhishtir’s last words. Guru Drona only heard that Ashwatthama was dead.

His knuckles went white as he clenched his hands. He swayed, lightheaded, and stumbled from his chariot, pulling his armor off. “My son!” he wailed.

Arjun’s heart pierced, remembering Abhimanyu and Ghatotkach. All the Pandavas were weeping, watching their Gurudev shrink from a formidable warrior to a broken father.

“Ashwatthama!” Drona cried. He was slumped over when he had once stood ramrod straight. He turned to Krishna. “How could my son be dead, Giridhar?”

Krishna looked at his devotee with compassion. “The soul never dies,” he reminded Drona. “The soul returns to its one true relation.”

“The Almighty,” Drona remembered. He fell to his knees before Krishna. “You’re my Almighty, Krishna. I beg you to take me home.” He sat before the Lord, crossing his legs and straightening his back in lotus position. Chanting the name of Krishna, Drona prepared himself for his final breath.

Dhrishtadyumna leaped from his chariot, the blade of his sword gleaming in the late afternoon light. His swift feet silent, he ran to Drona.

Drona focused his mind, heart, and soul on Krishna. *Giridhar, Giridhar, Giridhar*, he chanted, remembering that sweet story of Krishna lifting Mount Goverdhan. *Giridhar, take me home.*

Dhrishtadyumna’s sword cleaved Drona’s head from his shoulders.

Seen only by Krishna, Drona’s soul came out of his body. With Krishna’s blessings, he ascended to Krishna’s realm to live forever with Giridhar.

Duryodhan appointed Karn as the new commander-in-chief. Karn headed straight for Arjun and they engaged in battle. Karn came close to destroying Arjun time and time again but Krishna’s protection and Arjun’s skill warded off Karn’s lethal prowess.

On the other side of the battlefield, Nakul killed many of the one hundred Kaurava brothers while Sahadev slaughtered Shakuni.

Bheem sought out Dushasan who was powerful, meeting Bheem blow for blow until they abandoned their maces and wrestled, rolling on the dusty ground. Bheem shoved Dushasan down on his stomach, yanking Dushasan's arm behind his back. "This is the arm that dragged my wife by her hair," he said, "the arm that tried to strip her naked!" Bheem tore it off, throwing it across Kurukshetra towards Duryodhan.

Dushasan's scream of pain echoed into the sky.

"I vowed I would kill you with my bare hands, Dushasan!" Bheem tore Dushasan's chest open and Draupadi's tormentor was silent at last.

The spray of blood soaked Bheem and he roared in triumph, like a lion roaring over its prey. He crushed Dushasan's heart and smeared the blood in his mouth to fulfill his vow. Then he took a handful and ran towards the Pandava camp.

Draupadi cried out, thinking that Bheem was wounded.

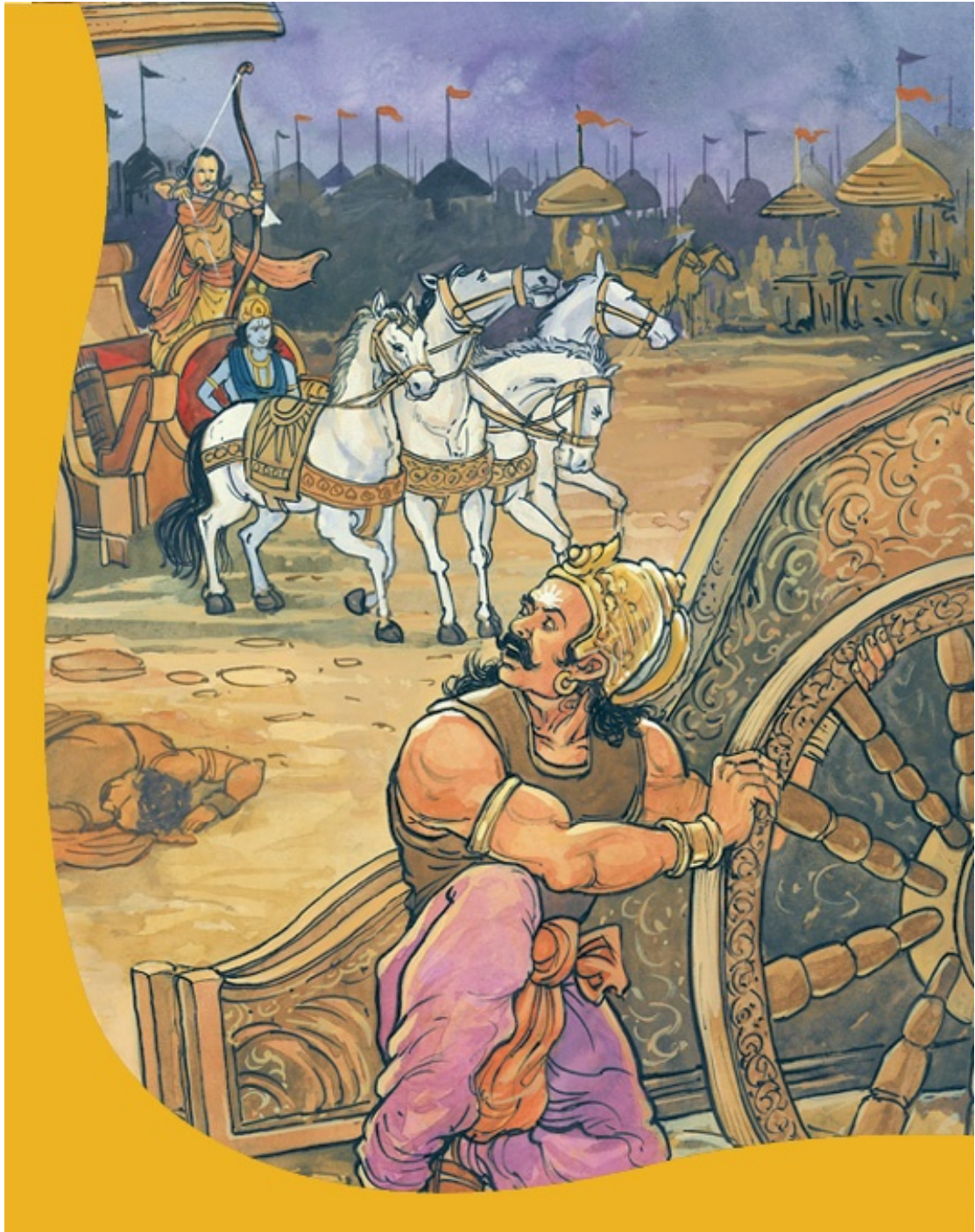
Then he held out his blood-filled hand. "For your hair," he told her. "Wash away what that villain did to you, Panchali."

She stared up at him. "Dushasan is...dead? Finally?"

"He will never torment you again, Beloved. He has paid the ultimate price."

Draupadi took the blood and washed her hair with it, weeping with grief, with relief, with thanks. She bound up her hair for the first time in years and held her head high.

Karn and Arjun still dueled, their chariots roaming over the earth as they fought for mastery over one another. At a critical point, when Krishna steered Arjun to higher ground, Karn's chariot wheel caught in a rut on the earth. His charioteer hauled and hauled on the horses but the chariot wouldn't budge. Desperate, Karn decided to call upon *Brahmastra*, the divine weapon Parashuram had given him. The mantra to summon it wouldn't come to his mind. Karn racked his brains, trying to remember, but the only thing that entered his head was his guru's curse.



In the moment when you need it most, you will forget everything I have taught you.

Karn fumbled with his bow, trying to set just an ordinary arrow but Arjun was too quick and broke Karn's bow string. Karn tried to re-string but his fingers wouldn't work. They didn't remember how. He stared at his hands, sweat pouring off him, willing them to remember.

In the moment when you need it most, you will forget everything I have

taught you.

Karn heard his guru's voice in his head, as if Parashuram were standing right beside him. *You have taken Duryodhan's gifts of wealth and power and glory. Your greed has corrupted you like I knew it would. Now face the consequences, my son.*

Karn realized that Parashuram was right. He'd followed Duryodhan and abandoned his guru's principles long ago. Was it any wonder that Parashuram's teachings left him now? Yet Karn couldn't give up. Duryodhan was counting on him. "Arjun!" Karn shouted. "My wheel is stuck in the ground and I'm going to free it. Don't attack me or you'll be breaking the rules!"

Arjun lowered his bow as Karn jumped to the ground.

"You won't free it," Krishna called to Karn.

Karn ignored him, as he'd ignored when Krishna had told him to join the Pandavas. Karn braced his feet against the ground and pushed the wheel.

"Mother Earth herself holds your wheel," Krishna said. "You have oppressed her again and again with the skills your guru gave you. You fight for evil even now. That is why she holds your wheel, Karn, so that Arjun may grant her justice. Arjun," Krishna turned his head. "What are you waiting for?"

Arjun took a step back. "He is unarmed, Lord. He is on the ground while I am mounted."

"Was Abhimanyu mounted when Karn and the Kauravas murdered him? No. Was Abhimanyu armed? No." Krishna pointed at Karn. "This man and his friends surrounded and murdered your son and now he demands that you follow the rules? He has conspired against dharma again and again, Arjun. Have you forgotten? Karn was with Duryodhan in the Varnavat plot. Karn was with Duryodhan in the partition of Hastinapur. Karn was with Duryodhan in that gambling hall. Have you forgotten," Krishna cried, "those words he spoke to Krishnaa that day?" Krishna's eyes were red. "He deserves death for his evil."

Arjun lifted his bow as Karn hauled on a wheel that wouldn't move.

“Only by destroying these corrupt parts of society can we save the people,” Krishna told Arjun. “Only by destroying this evil in ourselves can we practice the path of love.” Krishna shook his head. “This corrupt Karn has caused untold pain even though his conscience told him not to. He walked the path of evil even when he knew he shouldn’t. Arjun, fulfill your vow to kill him and tell Krishnaa that you have punished her tormentor. Fulfill your vow and grant all woman kind justice!”

Arjun set his arrow, seeing that horrific scene in his mind. Draupadi being stripped of clothes as Karn laughed and jeered. Draupadi weeping as Karn called her a prostitute. Arjun pulled his bowstring back.

Krishna’s red eyes were large with tears. “Show Karn the consequences of his actions.”

Arjun recited a mantra.

Karn looked up at Arjun from the wheel. “Little brother,” he whispered.

Arjun’s arrow sliced Karn’s head from his body.



51. A Mother's Blessing

Duryodhan's brothers were all dead. His uncle Shakuni was dead. His friend Karn was dead. He appointed Shalya, king of Madra, as his commander-in-chief and Yudhishtir killed Shalya too. The day's battle ended with only Kripa and Ashwatthama still with Duryodhan.

Gandhari came to the Kaurava camp. She'd wept for days, seeing no end to her pain and Kunti had wept with her, sharing in a mother's grief. Now they came to find her dead sons and her dead brother.

Duryodhan stood before her in her tent. "Bheem killed Dushasan today, Mother. I have lost all of my ninety-nine brothers."

She knew. All she could think of was Dushasan as a baby, playing in her lap. When had she lost her sons? When had they become men who deserved to die? She didn't know. To wonder it was like a thousand glass shards cutting into her flesh. She felt like her limbs were being torn off. If only she could save her last child! "The Pandavas are your brothers too," Gandhari told her eldest. "Make peace with them."

"No!" There were tears in his voice. "I might have done that after Dushasan's death and even Uncle Shakuni's but not now. Not after losing Karn. He was my best friend."

She turned away, knowing it was useless to make Duryodhan see reason. He'd never listened to her and now he would die too.

"Bless me with victory, Mother. That is all I need to win this war."

She shook her head, as she'd done when Duryodhan came to her before the war started. "My conscience forbids me," she told him. "Dharma is too important."

"The dharma of a warrior is to win wars and that's what I'm trying to do. What's so wrong with that?"

She gave a cry of frustration. "A warrior's dharma is to protect his people, not make wars that destroy them!" She took a deep breath. "My son, where there is dharma, there is Krishna. And where there is Krishna, there is victory. Make peace with the Pandavas. Only then will you win."

"Never. I hate them. I won't rest until they are all dead."

Gandhari bowed her head. Her son had never listened to her. Just as her husband had never listened to her, despite all her devotion to him. She'd tried so hard to stop this war. Her only refuge now was the Lord.

"Fine," Duryodhan said. "I'll win this war without your blessing."

She heard him turn to leave. He was her last living son. "Wait! I cannot bless you with victory but I can give you an invincible armor. Go and bathe in the river and then come to me as you were the day you were born."

Duryodhan shifted. "The day I was born? You mean naked, Mother?"

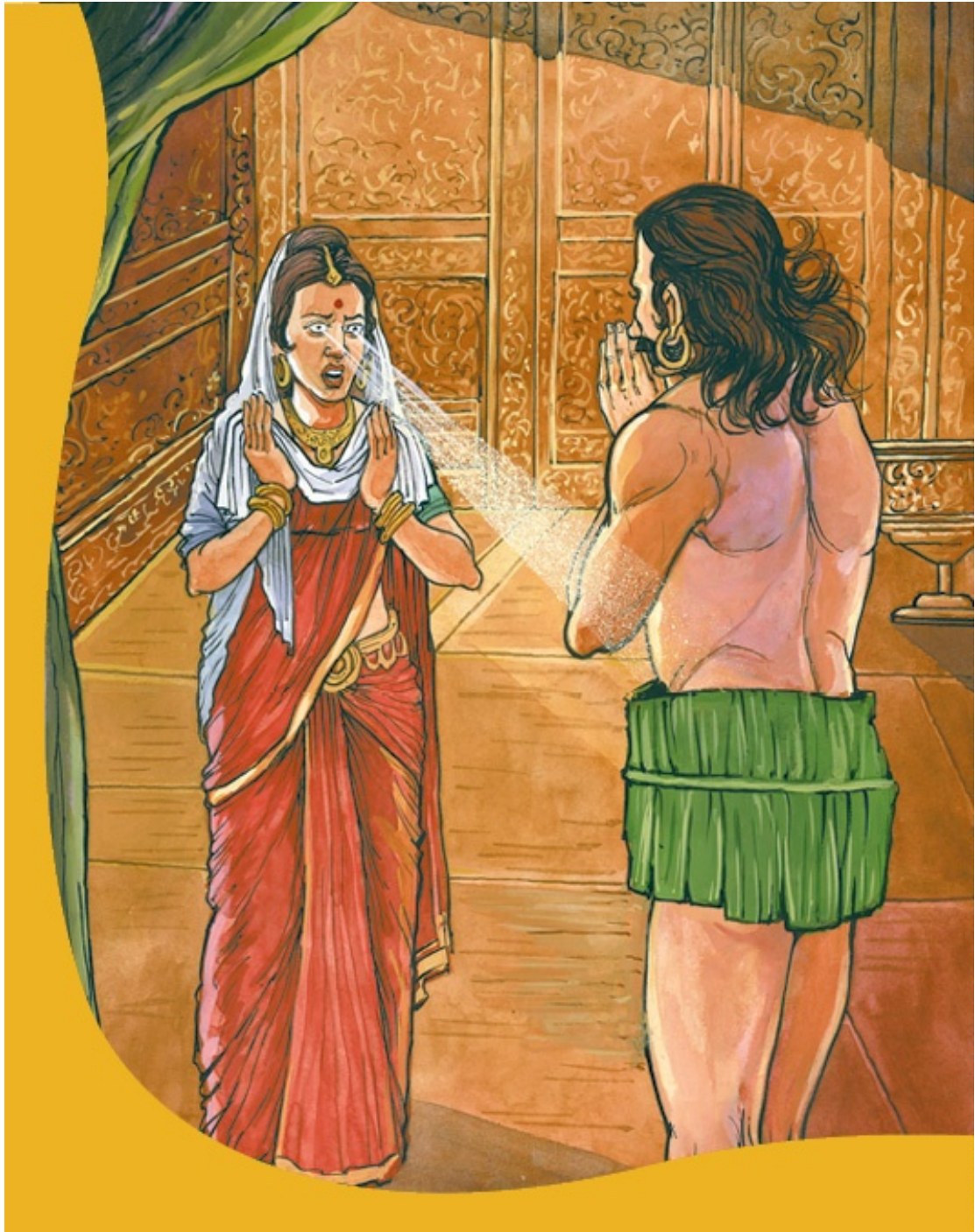
She nodded. "Hurry."

Duryodhan left the tent and she waited, meditating on Lord Shiv. She asked him for forgiveness for what she was about to do. But she was a mother. How could she not protect her child? "Please understand, Lord," she said. "I am your own devotee and my heart is broken."

Krishna was out walking the battlefield, close to the Kaurava camp. In the distance he saw Duryodhan walking in the dark, naked, wet from bathing in the river. He saw that Duryodhan was heading to Gandhari's tent and immediately understood what was happening. Krishna drew closer and when

he was close enough to be heard, he let out a loud laugh.

Duryodhan jumped, covering his private parts with his hands. “What are you doing here?” he accused Krishna.



“What am *I* doing here?” Krishna pointed at him. “What are you doing here? Why are you walking around naked on the battlefield? And why are you heading in Mother Gandhari’s direction!” Krishna slapped his own thigh, laughing. “This is beyond anything. Going naked before your own mother? Have you lost your mind?” Krishna clutched his stomach and howled with mirth. “Oh stop, stop,” he gasped. “It’s too much. My belly hurts.” He tried to compose himself. “Not even you would bare yourself before your own mother. I’m sure this is all just a delusion of my mind. But it’s so funny!” He howled

again, falling over with hilarity. "Arjun!" he shouted in the direction of the Pandava camp. "Arjun, come see."

Duryodhan ran away, back to the river. The moment he was out of sight, Krishna stopped laughing. He stood, somber, and looked towards the Kaurava camp. "Forgive me, devotee of Shiv," he said. "Dharma is too important."

Gandhari waited in her tent until Duryodhan returned. "I'm here, Mother," he said and walked to stand in front of her.

"Did you bathe as I told you?"

"Yes, Mother."

Gandhari then did what she'd not done in years. She reached up and untied her blindfold, baring her eyes. She looked upon Duryodhan and a light radiated from her gaze, surrounding Duryodhan, sinking into his skin. Gandhari poured everything into that one gaze. She poured her love for her children, her duty to her husband, her *bhakti* for her Lord Shiv. She gave everything to protect her last child.

When the light finally faded, Gandhari was able to see her eldest boy. He was bare except for banana leaves he'd wrapped around his middle, shielding him from his waist to his thighs. Her mouth dropped in horror. "What have you done?" she asked him.

He looked down at himself. "What?"

"Why are you wearing that? I told you to be naked!"

His brow puckered in confusion. "I couldn't come before you naked, Mother."

"But I told you to!"

"It's not clothes, just banana leaves. I thought it would be better this way."

"You *thought*? Since when have you ever *thought*!" She heaved a sob, and closed her eyes, wrapping her blindfold over her vision once more. "The part of you that was bare to my gaze is now as invincible as a divine weapon. No sword will cut you, no mace will break you, no arrows can penetrate your flesh. Nothing will be able to harm you." She shook her head. "But the part that was covered from my gaze is as vulnerable as it was before. If only you'd

learned to listen to your mother!"

Duryodhan stepped closer. "I will remove the banana leaves. You can do it again."

"I'm not a conjurer!" she snapped. "These are not cheap tricks. I gave everything in that one gaze and you wasted it."

"It's not wasted, Mother," Duryodhan clasped her shoulder. "I promise it's not wasted. Tomorrow I'll fight a mace duel with Bheem and you can't hit below the belt in a mace fight."

She shook her head.

"I promise you, I'll win!" Duryodhan exclaimed. "I'll take revenge for my brothers and my uncle and then you'll be happy again." He left the tent, sure that victory was his.

Gandhari knew better. Her tears seeped through her blindfold, helpless before fate. "You've never understood what would make me happy," she whispered to her son. "You've never cared."

She covered her face with her hands. "Lord," she whispered. "Is this how you punish me for trying? It's not fair. Not fair." She fell to her knees and wept throughout the night.



52. Invincible

When the Pandavas came to Kurukshetra in the morning, the Kaurava army was nowhere to be found. Not Kripacharya, Ashwatthama or a single troop was there. The Kaurava flag still flew high in their camp so they'd not surrendered.

One of the Pandavas' spies returned with a villager. "This man saw Crown Prince Duryodhan near a lake close by."

They reached the lake of clear blue water and saw Duryodhan sitting at the bottom of it, meditating.

"He chooses now to meditate?" Arjun asked.

"If only he'd meditated years ago, we might not be in this mess," Yudhishtir said.

Seated in the water, Duryodhan looked up to see them standing by the lakeshore.

"Come out and fight like a warrior," Yudhishtir called to him. "Guru Drona never taught any of us to hide. Don't disgrace him like his, even if you have disgraced him in every other way." Yudhishtir turned to Sahadev. "Duryodhan is not wearing his armor so go and collect it for him. Take

permission from Mother Gandhari first.”

Sahadev rode straight to Gandhari’s tent. He kneeled and touched her feet.

She raised her soft hands to bless him. “Live long, my son. You’ve left the battlefield early, is something the matter?”

“Nothing is the matter, Elder Mother. I have only come to collect Brother Duryodhan’s armor. May I take it to him?”

She nodded. “Of course.” As he rose, she touched his face, then kissed his forehead. “My son,” she said.

He held her hands against his face. “Always, Elder Mother. I am yours. We are all yours.” He wiped a tear that slid down her cheek, then went to his mother Kunti’s tent.

“Live long,” she said as he touched her feet.

He kneeled before her. “Soon it will all be over, Mother.” He kissed her hands, and then rode back to his brothers with Duryodhan’s armor and weapons.

From under the water Duryodhan saw the glint of his protective gear in Sahadev’s arms. He shot to the lake surface and hauled himself out. “Give it to me.”

“Certainly,” Sahadev’s voice was dry. “We’ve never stolen your belongings.”

They all waited while Duryodhan got dressed. Finally, he faced Yudhishtir. “I’m wounded. I’m tired. I’m alone. Such conditions are not regarded as a fair fight.”

“My Abhimanyu was also wounded and tired and alone,” Yudhishtir said. “So don’t ask for sympathy, you murderer. Still, we Pandavas fight according to dharma.” Yudhishtir crossed his arms. “You may choose your opponent from among us and you may even choose your weapon. And whoever you choose, if you defeat them then you win.”

Duryodhan laughed. “Still a fool after all these years? You never did learn how to gamble.”

“I never learned how to cheat,” Yudhishtir corrected. “But I think your pride will allow nothing other than a mace fight and no one other than Bheem.”

“For once, you’re right,” Duryodhan said. “Tell that glutton to get ready to die.”

Bheem shouldered his mace. “We’ll see about that.”

Just as the duel was about to begin, Balaram drove up on his chariot. Balaram had not fought on either side because he’d not liked the conflict between brothers. Instead, he’d gone on pilgrimage and was only now returning.

Bheem and Duryodhan touched his feet. They had both studied mace fighting under him and therefore he was their guru. “I will watch and see what you have learned from me,” he told them.

They faced each other and their maces clashed, the sound vibrating over the lake and across the air of Kurukshetra. Bheem wielded his mace with unparalleled skill, twisting and turning with the heavy weight weapon as if it were a feather. Yet no matter how hard he hit or how swift his blow, Duryodhan was unaffected. Bheem hit him directly on the head, a blow that would kill any man, and Duryodhan *laughed*, backhanding Bheem out of the way.

The difference was that Bheem did not laugh. He’d fought relentlessly for days on end and he was just as wounded and tired as Duryodhan had pretended to be. Bheem took a blow to his chin and went down to his knees, his vision blurry. He blinked and managed to lurch backwards to avoid another blow on his head. He staggered to his feet and caught Duryodhan in a twist, hammering against his spine. It should have shattered but Duryodhan only turned, seeming untouched.

“What is happening?” Arjun gasped to Krishna.

“Obviously, Duryodhan is winning,” Krishna replied.

“But how?”

“Mother Gandhari’s blessing...” Krishna tapped his finger against his chin, his eyes far away.

“Krishna!” Arjun said. “What do we do?”

Krishna’s eyes sharpened as Bheem twirled his mace. “What an amazing hit

from Brother Bheem.”

The other Pandavas looked at him as if he were mad. “It was well struck,” Krishna said, gesturing. “And there’s another one. Bheem, glory! Glory, brother!” He slapped his thigh.

Bheem swiveled to avoid a clip on his shoulder and brought his mace down on the back of Duryodhan’s neck in a bone-crushing smash. It had no effect. Duryodhan simply countered with another backhand that Bheem back-flipped to avoid.

“Glory, Bheem. Glory, glory!” Krishna slapped his thigh again and again.

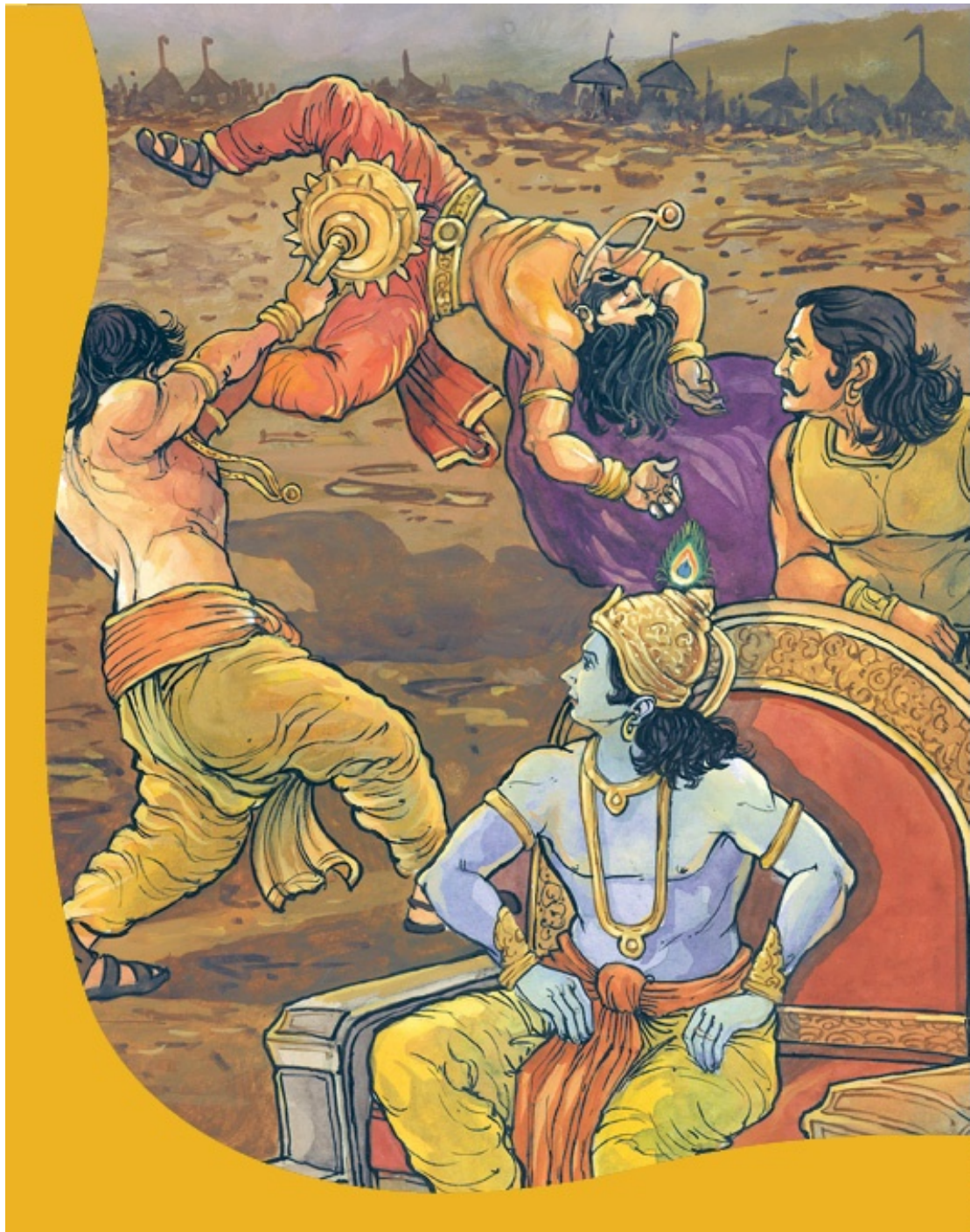
Bheem finally looked over at Krishna and got a blow to his ribs from Duryodhan for it. Bheem’s ribs cracked and he fell right in front of Krishna. Krishna slapped his own thigh again and again, just inches from Bheem’s face. “Glory glory glory,” he yelled with every slap.

Bheem got the message. He rolled onto his back just as Duryodhan was about to bring his mace down on Bheem’s spine. Swiping his legs in a circular motion which was torture on his ribs, Bheem was on his feet, kicking Duryodhan away.

Bheem attacked, concentrating his effort on Duryodhan’s shoulders to make Duryodhan duck. True to their training, Duryodhan ducked and Bheem spun all the way around, his mace low, smashing into Duryodhan’s thigh. The entire crowd heard the bone shatter.

Duryodhan screamed, falling, but Bheem wasn’t done yet. He twisted and hurled another blow to Duryodhan’s other thigh, crippling him. Blood gushed from both legs and Duryodhan writhed on the ground.

“Bheem!” Balaram shouted. “I and Drona taught you to never hit below the waist in a mace fight! Coward! I will kill you!” Bheem fell to his knees before his guru as Balaram raised his own mace to kill his disciple.



“Elder Brother,” Krishna called so that Balaram looked towards him. “When you were asked to take part in this war you refused. Now you wish to interfere?”

Balaram blinked.

“You have no idea what this Duryodhan has done,” Krishna said. “He’s broken every rule that exists. He tried to poison Bheem when they were children. He tried to burn all five Pandavas and Aunt Kunti to death at Varnavat. He

cheated in a game of dice and robbed the Pandavas of everything, even their freedom and self-respect. This villain and his friends,” Krishna continued, “abused helpless and vulnerable Krishnaa.” Krishna shook his head at Balaram. “You never said then to Duryodhan that he had broken the rules. Is that not unfair? Duryodhan slapped his thigh and told Krishnaa to sit on it and from that moment his thigh was destined to be broken!”

Balaram looked down at Duryodhan who was moaning on the ground.

Krishna gripped Balaram’s arm, lowering his mace. “This evil man and his friends surrounded our lone, unarmed, unmounted Abhimanyu and slaughtered him like a pack of wolves attacking a lamb. Did you know that? Did you care? Or is it only Bheem who has to follow rules?”

Krishna lifted Bheem to stand, being gentle around Bheem’s cracked ribs. “Come, Brother, you’re victorious. We will celebrate in the Kauravas’ camp tonight.” The other Pandavas surrounded Bheem, helping support him.

As they walked away, Bheem staggered, tears rolling down his face. “I didn’t want to break the rules...”

Krishna held his hand. “Balaram will forgive you. You’d vowed to break Duryodhan’s thigh for what he did to Krishnaa and Duryodhan knew that. Still, he came into this duel thinking he was invincible. Well, let this be a lesson to all: No one is invincible.”

The Pandavas sent their forces back with their sons to Draupadi and proceeded with Krishna to the Kaurava camp. They announced at the gates that Duryodhan had fallen in a duel with Bheem. The camp surrendered and the Pandavas drove in as conquerors. Arjun gazed upon the soldiers of Hastinapur who knelt in submission. He got down and began raising them, embracing them, assuring them that Duryodhan’s rule was over.

Then Krishna took Arjun up on his chariot again. The other Pandavas were puzzled so they followed on foot as Krishna drove to a desolate and abandoned part of the battlefield. “Get down, Arjun,” Krishna said. Puzzled, Arjun obeyed and Krishna also stepped down. He set the four swift horses free, ignoring Arjun’s sounds of protest. Then Krishna walked to Arjun, pushing him backwards, far away from the chariot.

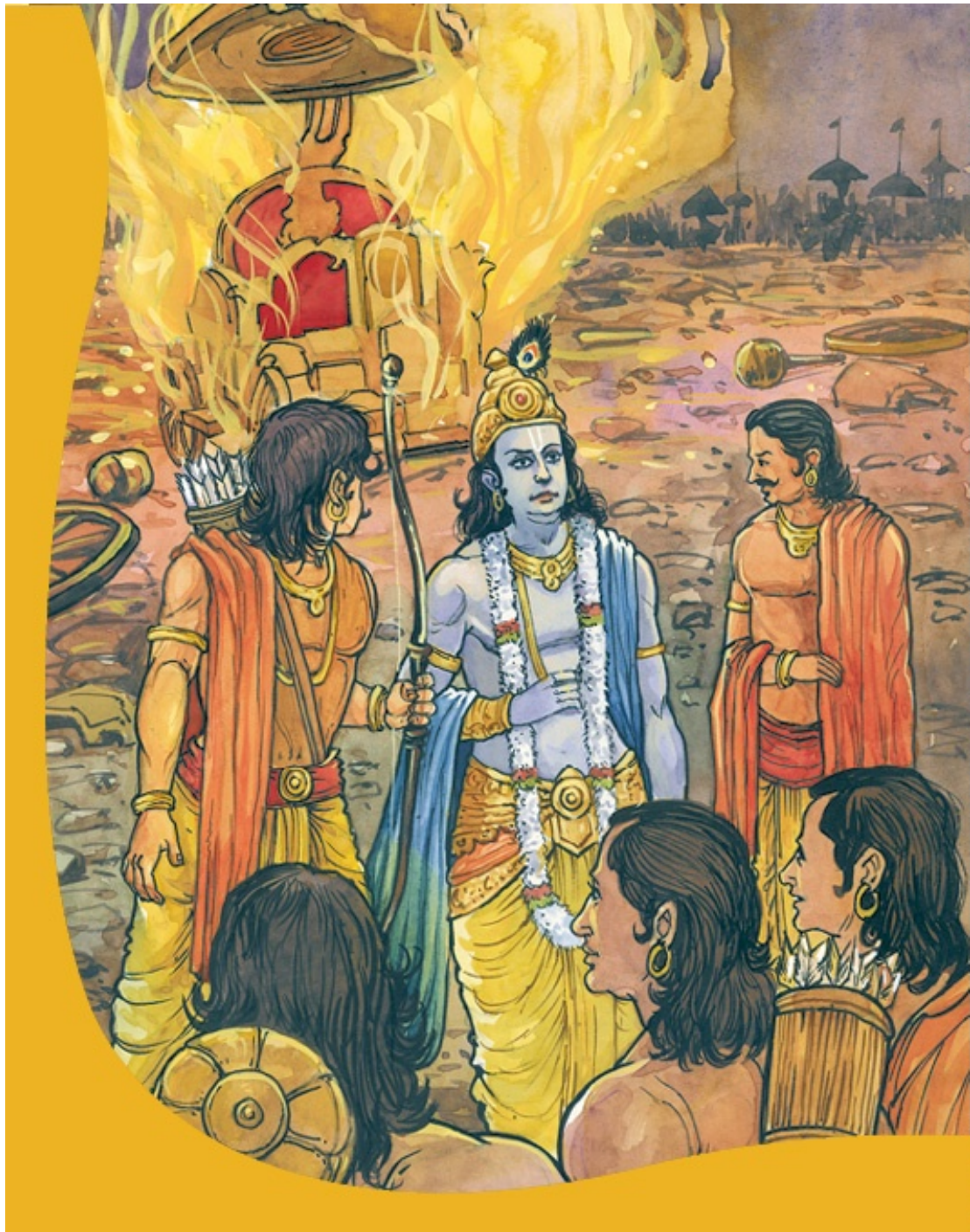
“What are you doing?” Arjun asked.

“Shhh...” Krishna pointed at Arjun’s battle flag, where Bheem said Hanuman himself sat. “Do you see that?”

Arjun squinted and saw his monkey banner. Before his very eyes, Hanuman vanished from the flag so that only a bare cloth flew in the breeze.

The chariot exploded.

Arjun was thrown onto his back by the force, the ground beneath him shaking. Gasping, trembling, Arjun managed to sit up, covered in earth and ash. His chariot was on fire. All that iron and steel and gold turned red and melted, dissolved in moments. What had been an unparalleled celestial chariot gifted by Agni was now no more. “How-?”



“The force of all the divine weapons used against you,” Krishna said, still standing. “The weapons used by Bheeshma, Drona, and Karn. The only reason why your chariot didn’t disintegrate long before, Arjun, was because I and Hanuman were seated there.”

The other Pandavas reached them, white-faced from the explosion. Yudhishtir helped Arjun up as Bheem limped over, aided by the twins. They all stared at Krishna.

“You said no one is invincible,” Bheem said to Krishna. “I say no one is invincible except you. You saved us, Lord. You always save us.”

Love shone in Krishna’s lotus eyes. “You are my devotees.”



53. Victory and Defeat

The sun had set.

Ashwatthama and Guru Kripa came out from their hiding place and followed the trail the Pandavas had left to where Duryodhan was. They saw a glint of his armor on the ground.

Duryodhan opened his eyes as they approached.

“He’s alive!” Ashwatthama kneeled and lifted Duryodhan’s head onto his lap. “My friend, if only we’d been with you but we couldn’t find you and had no orders. So we hid!”

Kripa kneeled on Duryodhan’s other side and checked the crown prince’s body. “The thigh bones are shattered and he’s lost a lot of blood. Too much.”

Duryodhan used blood from his thigh to apply a *tilak* to Ashwatthama’s forehead. “You’re now commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. Bring me the Pandavas’ dead bodies.”

“I will but if you wish to see them then I will have to attack now, at night.”

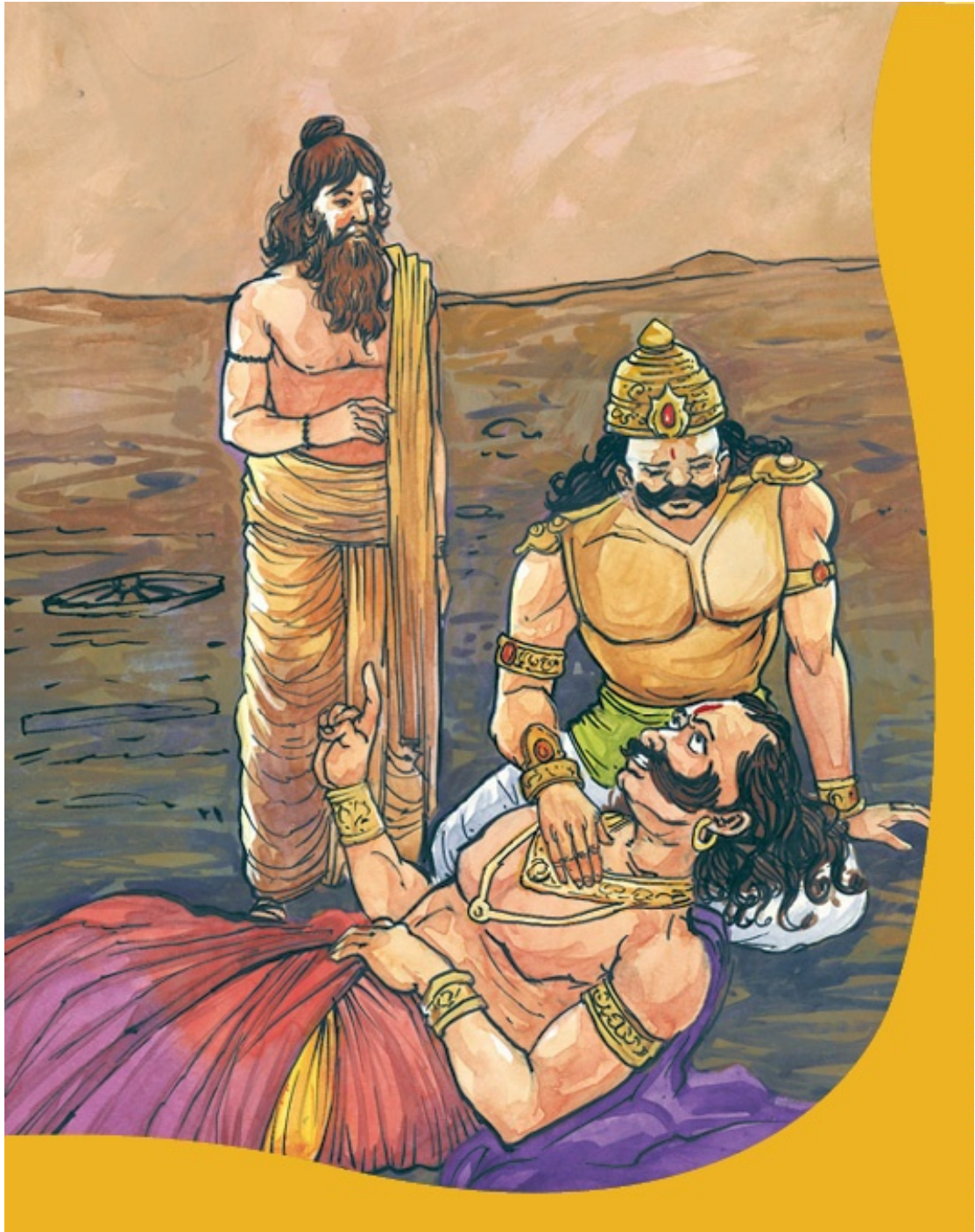
“I grant you permission,” Duryodhan said. “Go, be victorious.”

Ashwatthama and Kripa went to the Pandava camp. They didn’t know that

the Pandavas were in the Kaurava camp. While Kripa stayed outside, Ashwatthama crept in and shot mantra bearing arrows all over the camp. They hit the ground and exploded, sending human body parts flying in all directions. The blood was ghastly. Guards and soldiers ran around in disarray, unprepared for attack on this night of victory. An attack at *night!*

Soldiers were sent to alert the Pandavas but Kripa was waiting. He cut them down with his sword, on orders from his commander-in-chief.

Queen Draupadi and Princess Uttara were sleeping in Yudhishtir's royal tent. Draupadi's sons were asleep around them. The queen awoke at the commotion. Her sons awoke also and rushed to grab their weapons and protect their mother and sister-in-law.



Ashwatthama's form was backlit by the fires, his face in shadow. The guards quailed at this shadow warrior but still ran to protect the queen and princess. Ashwatthama cut off heads, slashed throats, gutted stomachs, drawing closer and closer to Yudhishtir's tent.

Anyone who tried to escape the slaughter or run to inform the Pandavas was taken down by Kripa. Pandava soldiers who'd survived the entire war lost their lives on this night, in a craven attack on a peaceful camp.

Draupadi's sons formed two lines of defense before their mother and sister-in-law. Then Ashwatthama was there and they engaged their shadow enemy in battle.

Ashwatthama thought he was fighting the Pandavas. They looked just like the Pandavas, fought in the same styles as the Pandavas. They stood between him and Draupadi who was shielding another—the pregnant Uttara who was clutching her belly.

Ashwatthama's rage made his sword swift. He cut down each brother, hearing Draupadi's screams of protest. He didn't care. These Pandavas had killed his friend! So what if he attacked at night? So what if he'd not declared his identity? So what if there were women present? These were enemies and he would kill them all.

Dhrishtadyumna came running towards Ashwatthama from another direction, his voice unmistakable as he called out to his twin sister.

Ashwatthama knew that at last he would get revenge for his father, Drona. He feigned a retreat so that Dhrishtadyumna would follow, then side-stepped and sent his sword through Dhrishtadyumna's stomach.

Dhrishtadyumna gasped, the breath leaving his body forever. Ashwatthama beheaded him as his body fell to the ground. Then Ashwatthama turned and cut the heads off each Pandava. He wrapped the heads in a cloth and took them to Duryodhan.

Dawn was just breaking as Ashwatthama and Kripa reached the place by the lake. Ashwatthama crowed: "My friend! Look! I've killed the Pandavas."

Kripa lifted Duryodhan's head onto his lap as Ashwatthama knelt beside him.

Duryodhan opened his eyes, trying to focus his vision on them. He smiled to see the bundle Ashwatthama carried. "You killed them all? If that is true then you have given me great joy in my last moments."

"Yes! I attacked during the night and slaughtered them!" He unwrapped the heads in the moonlight so his friend could see.

Duryodhan squinted down at them. There was a pause. "You fool," Duryodhan

said, his voice low. "These are not the Pandavas."

"What?" Ashwatthama grabbed a head and turned it for him to see. In the clear moonlight he saw the tenderness of skin, the youth.

"These are Draupadi's five sons," Duryodhan said. He turned away and a tear ran down his cheek.

Ashwatthama stared at Duryodhan, stupefied. Was Duryodhan not pleased? They were still the Pandavas' sons. Surely...?

"Villain," Duryodhan suddenly shouted. "My quarrel was with the Pandavas, not their sons! You have destroyed the Bharat clan. Who will rule Hastinapur now?"

There was silence in the air around them. Ashwatthama was too stunned to react.

Kripa shook his head, so ashamed that he had nothing to say. To have broken all the rules of dharma, attacking a camp at night and in shadow, and to not even fulfill their purpose! He couldn't imagine a worse failure.

Duryodhan gave a sob. "Run, you fools! The Pandavas will kill you. Draupadi won't rest until you're dead. Go!" He wept, pushing Kripa away. "Go," he said, as the light faded in his eyes. He didn't move. Duryodhan was dead.

Ashwatthama and Kripa looked at each other.

"Flee," Kripa told Ashwatthama. They ran in opposite directions.

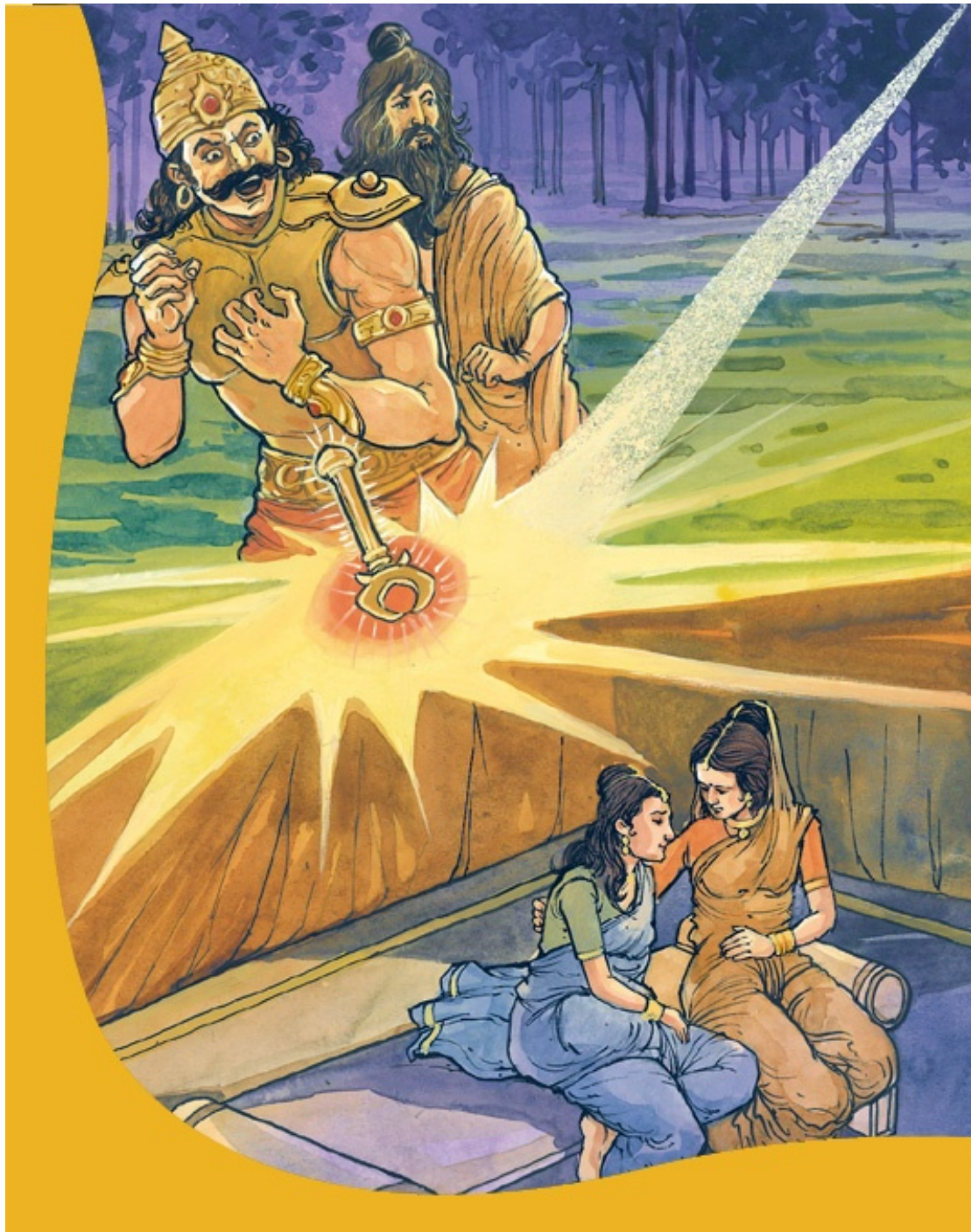
The Pandavas and Krishna finally received word of the slaughter. They rushed across the battlefield to find Draupadi crouched among their sons' beheaded bodies. Uttara was with her, shivering with shock.

Draupadi was trying to clean their sons' bodies but there was so much blood, it was impossible. Even Dhrishtadyumna had fallen. They were surrounded by the strewn bodies of their brave guards.

"We will find whoever has done this!" Bheem shouted. His ribs were bound and he was still limping but he clutched his mace. "Arjun, come!" Yudhishtir, the twins, and Krishna followed. They tracked the intruders across Kurukshetra, across fields and into the forest. Sage Vyas's *ashram* was in the

distance.

Ashwatthama was standing at the entrance of the *ashram* with Vyas, about to seek sanctuary. He saw the Pandavas and panicked. Summoning the divine *Brahmastra* weapon, he launched it at them.



“Arjun!” Krishna said.

Arjun summoned his own *Brahmastra* and launched it.

“Stop!” Vyas said. He raised himself into the sky between the weapons, blocking them with his own hands. “What are you doing?” he demanded from both Ashwatthama and Arjun. “Don’t you realize the destruction these weapons will cause? Do you wish the Almighty to have to create an entire new universe?”

“Arjun had no choice, Great Sage,” Krishna said. “He had to block the weapon Ashwatthama had already used.”

“I can call it back,” Arjun said.

“Then do so!” Vyas exclaimed. Arjun immediately spoke the mantra to retract his *Brahmastra*.

Vyas glared at Ashwatthama. “Well?”

Ashwatthama swallowed. “I don’t know how to retract it.”

“If you didn’t know that then why did you use it?” Vyas shouted. “Fool!”

“I can redirect it!” Ashwatthama rushed to say. “Turn it in a less harmful direction.”

“Then do that!”

Ashwatthama stared at the Pandavas, venom in his eyes. He was consumed by revenge for his father, for his friend. *If I cannot kill them*, he thought, *I will kill their future*. He whispered the mantra to redirect the divine weapon. It changed course, heading for Uttara and the child in her womb...

The Pandavas were oblivious of the danger. The moment *Brahmastra* was gone they ran straight for him, Bheem tackling him to the ground. “Evil man!” Yudhishtir said. “We will take you to Panchali for judgment. The Queen will decide what is to be done with such a lawless criminal.”

They bound his hands and gagged him and took him back to their wife.



54. Grace

Uttara sat with Draupadi in Yudhishthir's tent, facing the five dead brothers and Uncle Dhrishtadyumna. Mother Draupadi tried to make Uttara leave the area, saying that it was too messy for a lady in Uttara's delicate condition but Uttara wouldn't budge. Her mother-in-law needed her now.

When Abhimanyu had died, Uttara had not believed it at first. Then when she'd finally accepted it, she'd wanted to die. He was her love and she couldn't imagine life without him. It had been Draupadi and Arjun and Krishna who'd stayed with her, telling her over and over again that she must live. She must, they said, because she carried Abhimanyu's legacy inside her. She carried his child. If she gave up then what hope was there for the future? For dharma?

Uttara sat with Draupadi now because she realized that her child was the only hope left. Her five brothers-in-law were all dead. Everything now rested on this one hope she carried. She felt a sudden burning in her tummy and Uttara sucked in her breath.

Draupadi turned to her. "Uttara?"

The burning deepened and Uttara gasped, standing.

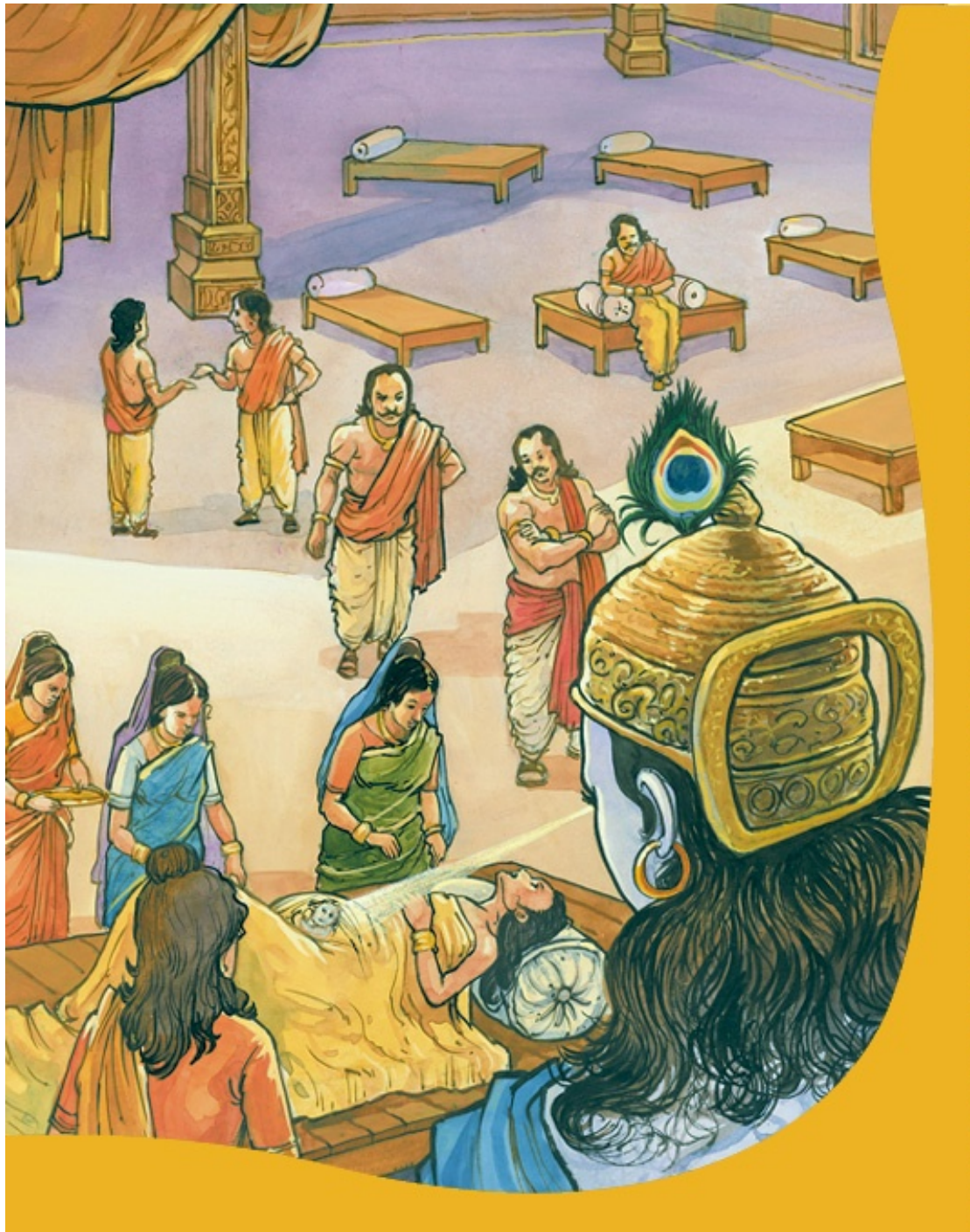
"Daughter?"

The burning intensified and Uttara cried out, walking to the tent's entrance. *What's happening?* she wondered as she stepped outside. That was when she saw it high up in the sky, flying through the air towards her. She knew what it was because Abhimanyu had once described the divine weapons to her. It was headed for her, for her baby!

She ran. "Help! Somebody help me!"

Her mother-in-law chased her, calling her name.

Uttara prayed for a way out. Her husband knew how to fight the divine weapons but he was dead. Her father-in-law, Arjun, was gone also, with the other Pandavas, gone with Krishna to hunt down that murderer.



That murderer...

That was when Uttara knew. This weapon came from the same murderer. He was trying to wipe out the Pandavas' family. Their future. Their hope.

Abhimanyu had said that Uncle Krishna was the Almighty. Abhimanyu had said that Krishna protected them all.

"Krishna!" Uttara screamed, clutching her belly. "Uncle Krishna, help me!"

The weapon turned downwards, hurtling towards her from its great height. The burning was so bad, it felt like her skin was peeling off. She staggered and fell, rolling on the ground until her back was to the weapon. "Krishna," she wept, "I don't care if I die. But please, Lord, please protect my baby."

The weapon was gaining speed so that a fire formed above her body, a blue fire that burned her sari. "Please, Uncle Krishna!"

Krishna was far away with the Pandavas but he heard her. Instantly, he manifested himself *within* Uttara's womb. He raised his hand and a shield came between Uttara and the weapon.

"Stop," he told *Brahmastra*, glaring at it.

Brahmastra paused. It was the Almighty's servant and the Almighty was telling it to stop. But it was ordered by divine mantra and it had to obey. It drove downwards, close enough to burn the baby's soft body.

"I said stop!" Krishna held out his hand and yanked *Brahmastra's* power into himself. Then he threw it outwards, back at *Brahmastra*, so that the heat intensified to a green ball of flame, making Uttara shriek and writhe.

In a blink, the weapon was dissolved. Krishna had neutralized its power.

The release of pain was so sudden that Uttara collapsed on the ground, shaking. She anxiously felt her belly. The baby kicked. "Uncle Krishna," Uttara said, weeping, "thank you for your grace!"

Within her body, the baby boy stared at the blurry shining form before him. He didn't know why he'd been in pain that suddenly disappeared but like any child he was easily distracted. This shiny person was very nice to look at.

Krishna turned to face the baby who blinked his big innocent eyes and smiled. Krishna smiled back. "Beloved Parikshit, you are safe now." He raised his hand in blessing and disappeared.

Draupadi crouched on the ground beside Uttara, a group of surviving guards around them. They all waited as the *void* examined the princess, each of them holding their breath.

The *void* took his hands off Uttara's belly. "She is well, the baby also."

Everyone heaved a huge sigh of relief. Some even started to laugh, giddy.

With the help of the *vaid* and Mother Draupadi, Uttara got to her feet, her hand on her lower back. That was when the Pandavas returned, hauling a bound Ashwatthama behind them.

“Here he is, Panchali!” Bheem threw Ashwatthama at Draupadi’s feet. “Here is the offender of all the laws of dharma!”

Draupadi looked down at Drona’s son, tears of worry for Uttara still streaming down her face. She couldn’t believe that it was Ashwatthama, a Pundit - their guru’s son - who had done this to her children. “Let him go,” she said.

Arjun stepped forwards. “Panchali, you don’t understand. This is the man who killed our sons!”

“Let him go.” She reached down and began to untie Ashwatthama herself, her fingers pulling at the knots Arjun had made.

“But why?” Bheem said as she released the rope and pulled the gag from Ashwatthama’s mouth.

She shook her head, her tears still falling. “He’s a Pundit. Your guru’s son. If you kill him then you will suffer for it.”

“But we have to kill him. He’s evil!” Bheem insisted.

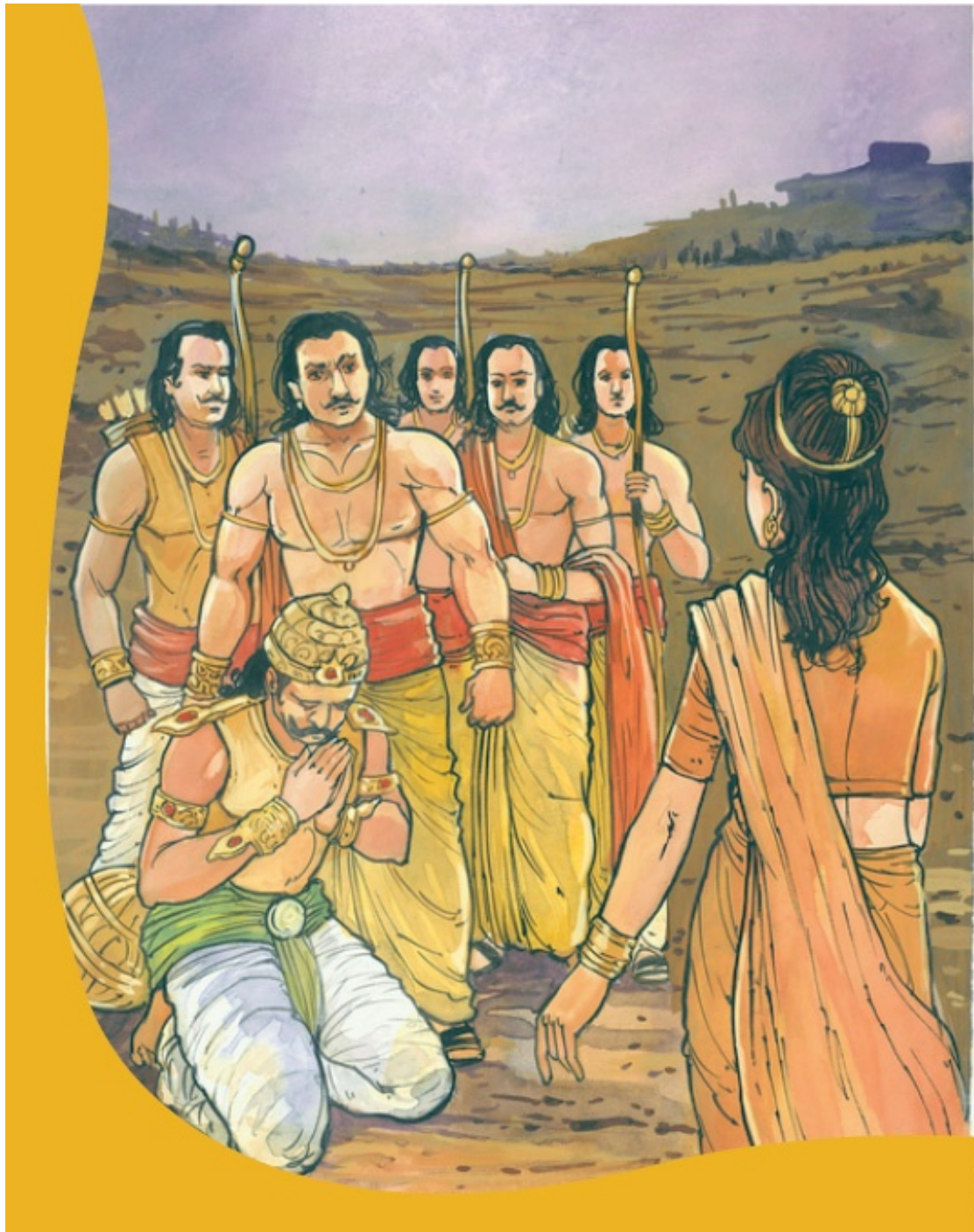
She shook her head again. “He is all his mother Kripi has left in the world. She has already lost her husband Drona. Will you take everything from her?” Draupadi wiped her eyes but her tears wouldn’t stop. “I’ve lost all my sons. I don’t want Ashwatthama’s mother to feel my pain.” Draupadi looked at Uttara beside her. “No mother should feel this pain,” she whispered.

“We must punish him, Panchali,” Yudhishtir said. “I understand forgiving him but his crime is too grievous to just let him go. He attacked our camp that contained women and children. He attacked at night, in secret, against all the rules of dharma. He slaughtered our children when they were only trying to protect others. He then ran away like a coward rather than face justice.”

“I want no killing,” Draupadi said. She sobbed: “No more killing!”

The Pandavas looked at each, helpless before Draupadi's decision.

Yudhishtir was amazed at his wife's heart. He'd thought she would issue the harshest punishment on Ashwatthama but instead she set the Pundit free, forgiving all crimes. She humbled Yudhishtir because she could forgive what even he, Dharmaraj, could not.



Krishna came to stand beside her. “It shall be as you wish, Krishnaa. We’ll set him free.” Krishna gestured to Yudhishtir. “First, take the jewel that grows upon his forehead. Without it, he will never be able to cause such destruction again.”

From birth, Ashwatthama had a blue jewel that grew in the middle of his brow. It was the result of austerities that Drona and his mother Kripa had practiced and it gave him divine strength and power. Ashwatthama struggled

but Bheem, Arjun and the twins held him down as Yudhishtir cut the jewel out. Ashwatthama screamed, the wound weeping blood all over his face.

Krishna's voice was calm. "Ashwatthama, you are an evil man. You attack helpless women and children and even unborn children. As a result, this wound of yours shall never heal. It will pain you for the rest of your long life and I promise that you will live long. You will live until the end of *Kali yug* and no one will give you sympathy for the pain you endure. That is your penance for what you have done this night and day."

"No," Ashwatthama fell at Krishna's feet. "No, I beg you, do not give me such a curse."

Krishna looked at him in disgust. "You deserve death! The only reason why you live is because of Krishna's mercy."

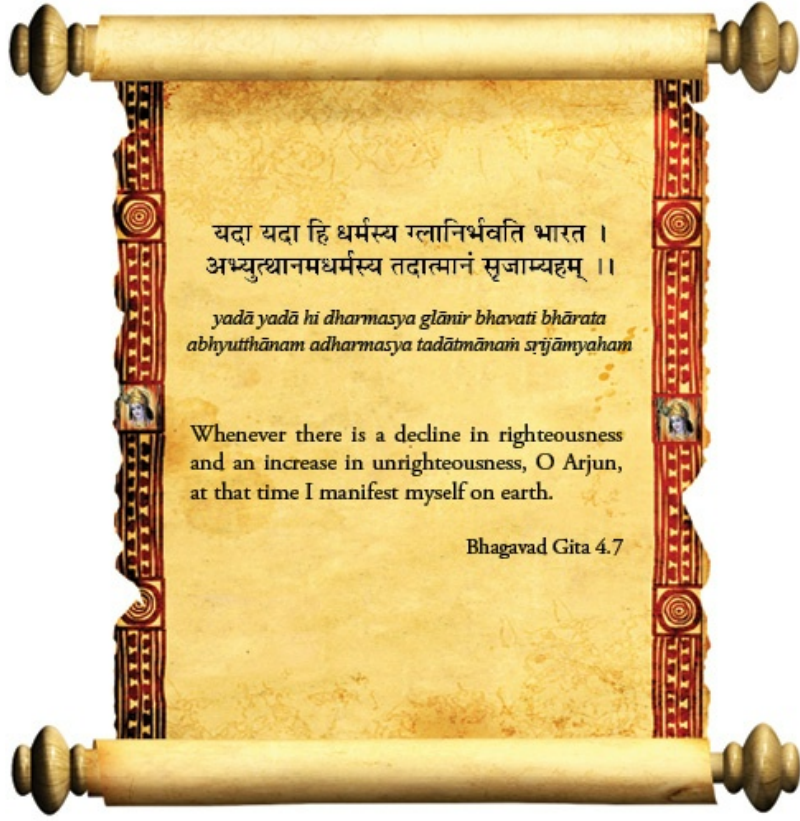
Ashwatthama turned to Draupadi, groveling at her feet. "Queen, I am your humble servant. You are compassionate. You are kind. I beg you to be merciful!"

Draupadi was still weeping. "Krishna," she whispered.

Krishna sighed. "Fine. Ashwatthama, I grant you one relief from your pain. If you go wherever the *katha* of the great Bharat clan is told and listen with a heart full of devotion and love, then your pain will ease during that time and only that time. Perhaps then you will finally learn what dharma is, what *bhakti* means. From now until the end of *Kali yug*, this will be your fate."

Ashwatthama cried and tried to clutch Krishna's feet but the Pandavas hauled him away. They threw him out of the camp and everyone he went to for help turned their backs.

No sympathy, no relief, for the rest of his life. None, except for when he listened to this Mahabharat *katha*. That was Krishna's judgment and Krishna's grace.



यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham*

Whenever there is a decline in righteousness
and an increase in unrighteousness, O Arjun,
at that time I manifest myself on earth.

Bhagavad Gita 4.7



55. Grief

In Hastinapur, Sanjay had lost the divine sight Vyas had given him. That was when Dhritarashtra knew that his darling son Duryodhan was dead. He retreated to his chamber and remained there, without his wife Gandhari or his brother Vidur or any other person to console him. “Krishna is the Almighty,” he said only to Sanjay, before he went away alone. “There was never any hope of victory because Krishna vanquishes all. Fate vanquishes all.”

The Pandavas tried to set their camp to some semblance of order. On Draupadi’s urging, they sent out scouts to find Kripacharya. He was meditating in the forest and they went to him. They told him that they knew he’d cut down their soldiers attempting to escape Ashwatthama’s slaughter. They also knew that he’d been acting on the orders of his commander-in-chief. They still revered him as the guru of the Bharat clan. They asked that he return with them to Hastinapur and he consented.

The Pandavas then went with Kripacharya and Krishna to find the bodies of their Kaurava brothers. It was the Pandavas’ duty to perform their last rites. They walked the battlefield, seeing the bodies of so many innocent soldiers.

There were women weeping on the battlefield. Widows, mothers, daughters,

sisters. All had come to find their menfolk.

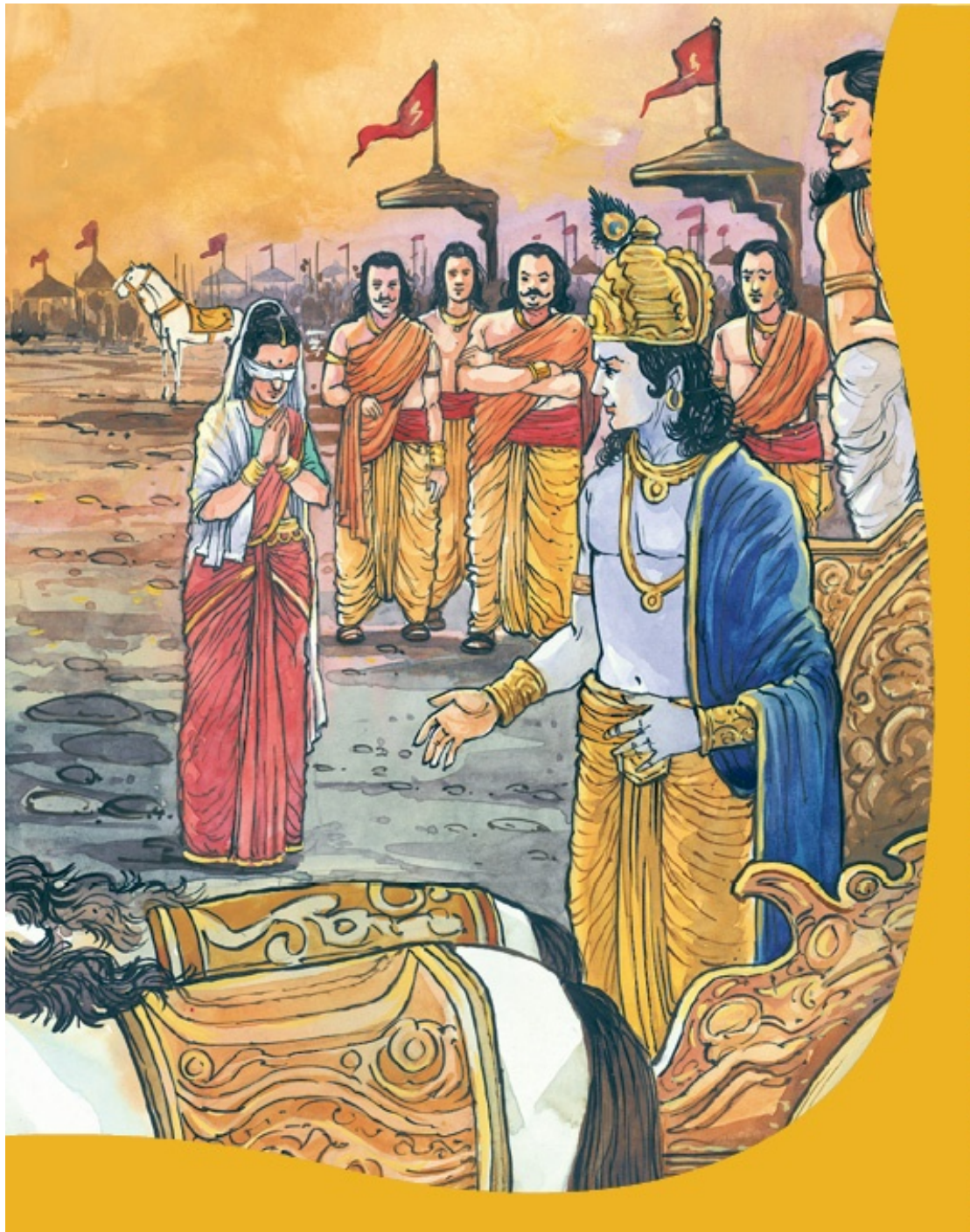
Yudhishtir felt the weight of their grief on his shoulders. He had agreed to this war. He had agreed to all this death. He pressed his lips together until they turned white. He was responsible.

They walked for miles, finding their brothers and friends and commanders, directing their soldiers to prepare the bodies for last rites.

That was when they saw Gandhari. She was with her maids, pointing out her sons' bodies even though she wore her blindfold. Her mother's heart knew. The Pandavas were about to touch her feet when she moved past them to face Krishna.

"I know who you are, Giridhar," she said.

Krishna watched her. "You are a devotee of Shiv. There is little you do not know."



“You are my mother,” she said in wonder, “and you are my father. You are my brother and you are my friend. You are my knowledge and my true wealth; you are my all, my everything, my God.”

Krishna went close to her and clasped her hands between his.

“You are Indra’s Govind,” she told him. “You are Gokul’s Gopal. You are Radha’s Madhav. You could have stopped this war, Giridhar,” she said softly.

He nodded. "Yes. Like a tyrant, I could have forced Duryodhan to my will, taken away his ability to choose. Except that there is a law called the law of *karm*, and under this law everyone has free will. Duryodhan had to choose and his choices made this war necessary. Otherwise, Mother Earth would have been burdened by so much evil."

"I cannot think of dharma and *adharma* now, Giridhar," her lips trembled. "Ask your mother, Devaki, about the pain of losing a child. She knows what it's like. That's why she will understand my words today." She tore her hands out of his and stepped back. She pointed at Krishna. "I curse you, my Lord, my God! I curse you that your family is destroyed as mine was. You will have to watch them slaughter each other and then you will know my pain."

The Pandavas, the women, the guards—they all listened in horror, sure that Krishna would argue.

He didn't. Instead, he only closed his eyes. "Devotee of Shiv," he said, "I accept your curse." She broke down in harsh ugly sobs and Krishna enfolded her in his embrace. He lifted Gandhari in his arms and turned back towards the camp. He carried her frail body slowly and she slumped in his hold, exhausted.

The Pandavas followed and as they walked, something caught Yudhishtir's eye. He turned to his left and saw an elderly lady in a white sari weeping beside a beheaded warrior. The elderly lady was Kunti and the beheaded warrior was Karn. Yudhishtir stepped towards her. "Mother?"

The younger Pandavas followed him, equally baffled by their mother's mourning of their enemy.

"Leave her be," Krishna told them.

"How can we do that?" Yudhishtir said.

"Mother?" Arjun said. "What are you doing? Why do you weep for this son of a charioteer?"

She did not turn to face her sons. Her silent sobs shook her fragile body.

"Mother!" Arjun ran to her, his voice frantic. "Why do you weep for this evil man?"

She shuddered. "Because he was my son!"

The Pandavas lurched back at her words.

"But-but how?" Yudhishtir asked, frozen in place.

"Before I married King Pandu," she said, "Surya granted me a son. I was afraid to tell my father so I sent my baby away in secret. When he appeared in the arena that day and challenged Arjun, I tried to tell you but I fainted and then it was too late! All these years you've been enemies and every angry word between you has been a knife in my heart."

The Pandavas were silent, trying to absorb the truth. They had killed their brother.

"Do you see, devotee of Shiv?" Krishna said to Gandhari, holding her close, "My Aunt Kunti also gave a son in this war. You're not alone in your grief."

Gandhari continued to weep in Krishna's arms. She wept for Kunti, for their lost sons.

Arjun was clutching his head like a madman. Bheem and the twins were staring at each other like this was some horrible joke they couldn't understand. Yudhishtir was the only one who had calmed. "You kept such a secret from us, Mother?" he said softly to Kunti.

"I couldn't find a way to tell you."

"Do you realize that this secret has caused the deaths of thousands? We went to war. We killed our own brother. If you'd only told us then so much death could have been prevented."

She shook her head. "I wanted to tell you."

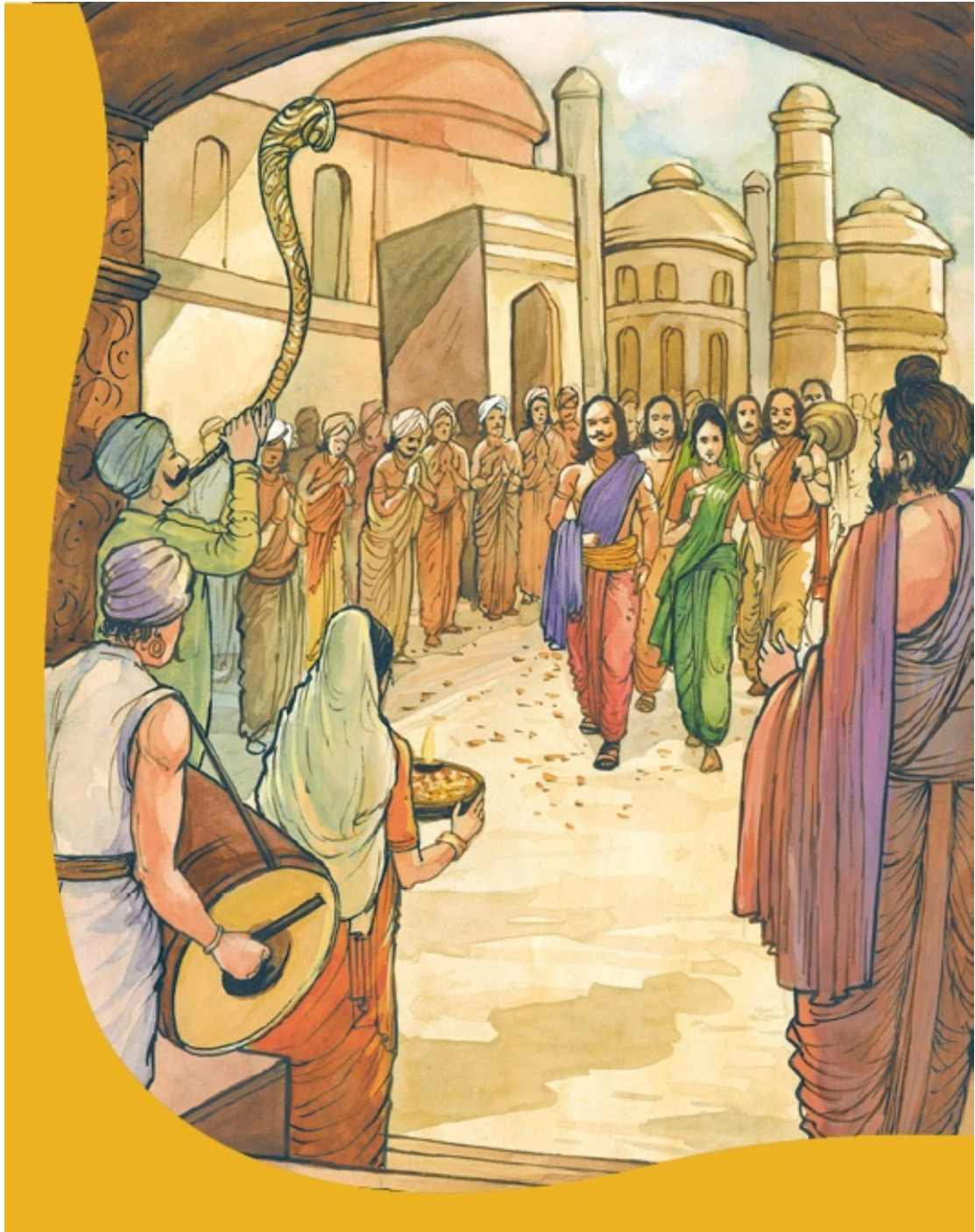
"I curse all women from this day," Yudhishtir said. "I curse all women that they will never be able to keep a secret like this again."

Krishna set Gandhari beside Kunti and let them mourn their sons.

The Pandavas performed the last rites for their brother Karn, for their Kaurava brothers, for their sons, uncles, in-laws. They oversaw the last rites of their soldiers, creating provisions for the families of fallen warriors.

They took down the camps on either side of Kurukshetra, each tent falling to the ground as if it were also a fallen soldier.

Then Yudhishtir and Draupadi and the younger Pandavas proceeded to Hastinapur with Guru Kripa and Sage Dhaumya. Krishna, Gandhari, and Kunti were with them and they were welcomed at the gates by Vidur and all the representatives of the people. Dhritarashtra was not there.



The people themselves cheered and waved as Yudhishtir and Draupadi drove by. They threw flowers upon the couple and shouted out: “Glory! Glory!”

On reaching the court, Kripa and Dhaumya placed Yudhishtir and Draupadi on the throne. Sage Vyas himself arrived and performed the *raj tilak*, placing the crown upon Yudhishtir’s head.

Dhritarashtra stayed in his chamber. All his ambitions and political maneuverings had been for nothing. The Pandavas finally ruled Hastinapur as

Pandu had always planned.

Yudhishthir sat upon the throne and felt himself unclean. He saw this throne as covered with the blood of his brother Karn and his guru Drona and his grandsire Bheeshma. The blood of his sons, his soldiers, his people—all of it spilled just so he could sit on this throne.

It wasn't worth it, Yudhishthir thought. If anyone had died then it should have been him but he still lived. How was that fair? It was his fault. He was a greedy selfish man. He wasn't worthy of the throne. He should retire to the forest and live out his life in exile.

Part of him knew that he wasn't being rational. His people had fought a giant war for him and now he wanted to leave them? That couldn't be right. Part of Yudhishthir understood that his thoughts came from his grief. But the other part, the part that wondered if this might all have been stopped if he'd only known that Karn was his brother...that part could not accept his rational side.

Yudhishthir knew that he was at fault. He was guilty. He did not deserve the throne.

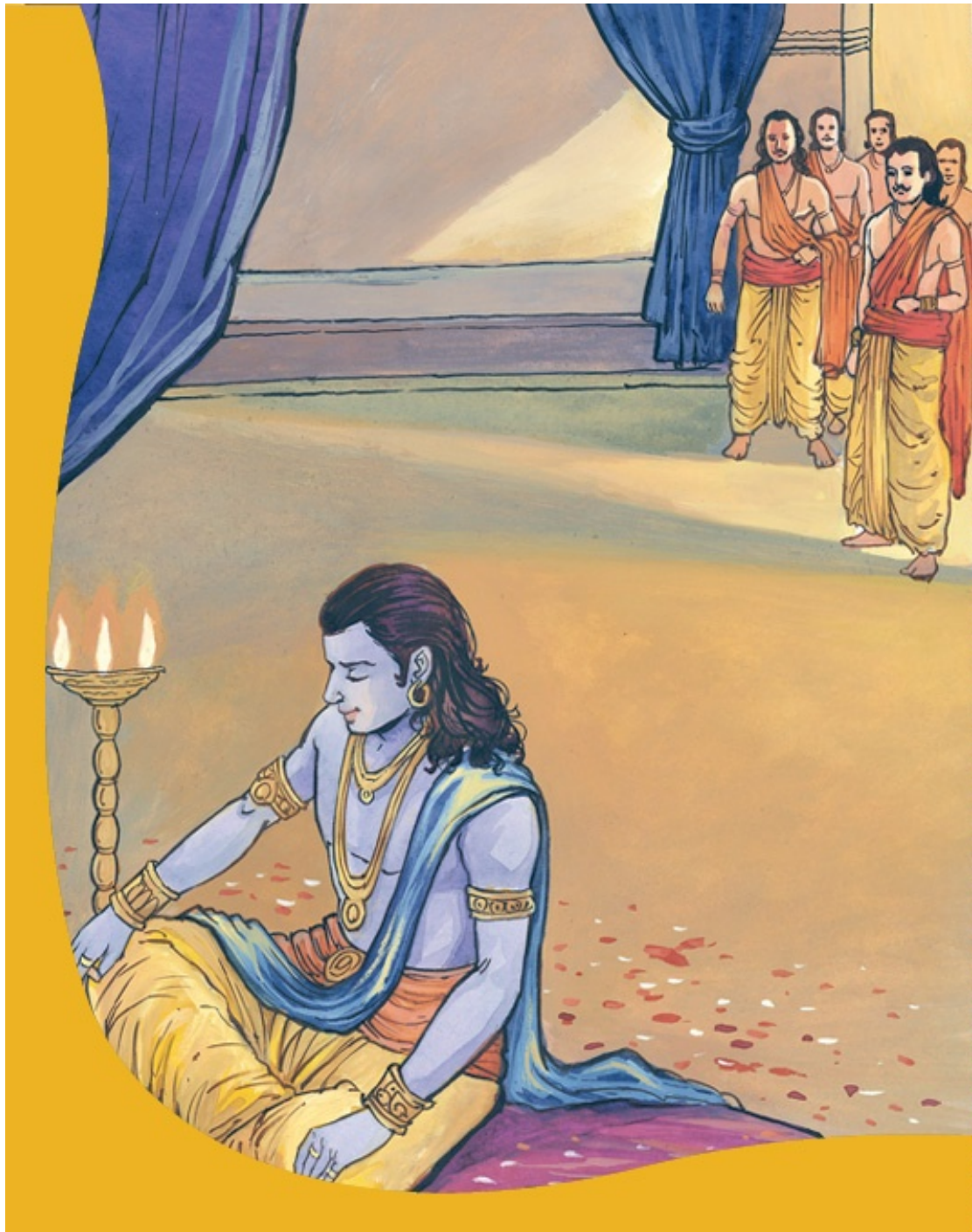


56. The Power of Bhakti

Krishna was preparing to leave Hastinapur. He had been long from Dwaraka and his family awaited him.

The Pandavas' ached to know that he would leave them. Draupadi ached. How could they bear for him to go when he was their sole comfort in the world? They rose early in the morning and went to Krishna's luxurious guest quarters to help him bathe and dress.

They thought that they would need to wake him but when they entered his chamber Krishna was seated by the window on the ground, his legs crossed, his fingers relaxed in a *mudra* pose on his knees. As the dawn light touched his face, they saw that his eyes were closed in meditation.



They gasped.

Krishna opened his lotus eyes at the sound. He turned to them.

Yudhishthir swallowed and came forward, the others following him. “Lord, you are the Almighty. You are greatest in power and knowledge and love. There is no one above you. We have learned this from our mother Kunti, and the wisdom of our elders, and our own experience. Yet here we find *you* meditating. On what? Is there some power above you that we do not know

about?”

Krishna smiled. “Yes, there is a power above me.”

They all gasped again.

“Who? What? Where?” Yudhishtir demanded to know.

Krishna unfurled his legs and rose. He put his hand on Yudhishtir’s shoulder. “Greater than I are my devotees.”

“Your devotees?” Yudhishtir asked, bewildered.

Krishna nodded. “When a devotee loves me then I am compelled to go to them, to be with them, to serve them however they wish. I am helpless before their love.”

Draupadi put her hand to her mouth. “This is why you accepted Mother Gandhari’s curse? Because she is your devotee?”

Krishna nodded. “Nothing can bind me except my devotee’s love. Mother Gandhari’s *bhakti* is like an ocean. I cannot let her words be false even if they go against me.”

The Pandava brothers stared at him as if they’d never seen him before. “You give your devotee such power?” Yudhishtir asked.

“*Bhakti* is the ultimate power.” Krishna said. “So when you see me meditating, you see me meditating on my *gopis* and *gopas*. On Gandhari and Kunti. On Abhimanyu and Uttara. On Ghatotkach and Pariksit. On you and Krishnaa.”

The Pandavas fell to their knees. “Lord,” they whispered.

He lifted each of them and embraced them. “You meditate on me, therefore I meditate on you.”

The Pandavas served as his attendants, bathing and dressing him. Dhaumya and Vidur came and performed his *puja*. Draupadi cooked his breakfast and fed him. Finally, they walked with him to his chariot, where a great crowd of Hastinapur’s people were gathered to bid Krishna farewell. At their head stood a frail lady dressed in a white widow’s sari. Her face was lined with her advanced years and her hands trembled as she reached out for Krishna when he sat upon his golden chariot. Queen Mother Kunti gazed up at him with

eyes shining with love.

“Giridhar,” Kunti said, “when I saw you lift Mount Goverdhan all those years ago, I knew then that you were the Almighty. When my Bheem was saved from Duryodhan’s poison, I knew you had protected him. When my family almost perished in the fire at Varnavat, I knew you had dug the tunnel for us to escape. When my daughter-in-law Draupadi was about to be dishonored, I knew it was you who shielded her. Countless times my children have faced dangers and it was always you who rushed to save them. You even tried to protect my Karn even though he wouldn’t let you.

“Krishna, I used to pray that we would have no calamities and that my children would always live in happiness. But again and again when my family has faced calamities and sorrow, I have seen you run to help us. And when we have enjoyed material happiness, you have left us. Now I see that true happiness is to be in your presence and true sorrow is to be far from your side. Therefore, Lord, I ask for calamities and care not for material joys.”

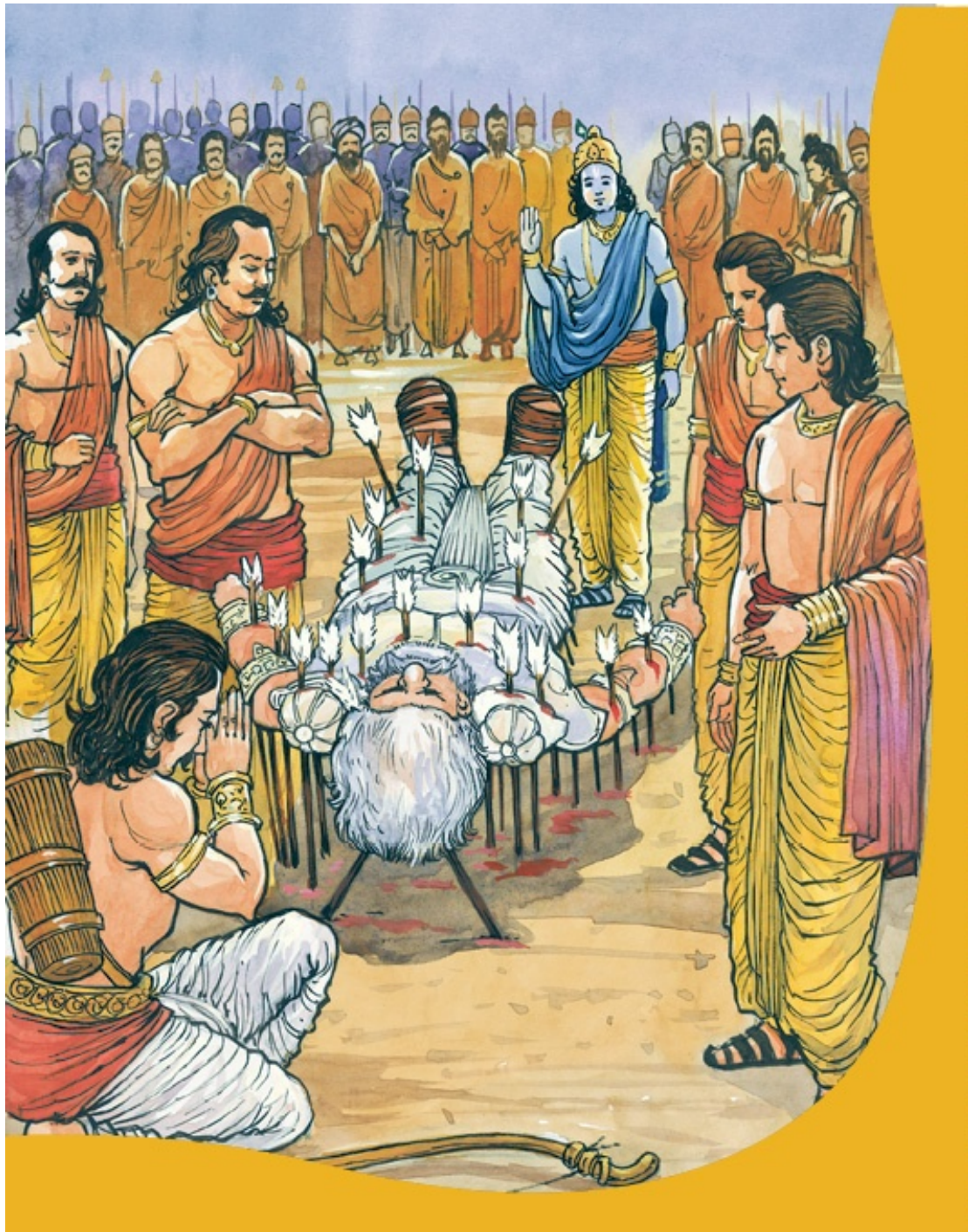
Krishna leaned down and embraced her. “Beloved Aunt,” he whispered. “I am always at your feet.”

The Pandavas knelt around Kunti. Hers was the *bhakti* Krishna had spoken of. The Pandavas worshipped their mother.

Uttara, Gandhari, Draupadi, Vidur, and countless others came to Krishna to offer their prayers. The sages, the Pundits, the warriors, the merchants, the laborers. The Pandavas listened to all and were humbled. So many loved Krishna. Before that, the Pandavas were insignificant.

Yudhishtir, in particular, was humbled by this. He still believed he was not worthy of the throne and didn’t know what he’d do when Krishna left. How could he bear the separation from his Lord? It would be better if Yudhishtir retired to the forest and meditated on the Almighty.

Krishna knew what Yudhishtir was thinking and made a decision. “I will not leave for Dwaraka today,” Krishna said and after a moment of surprise, all of Hastinapur cheered. Krishna stepped down from his chariot and the Pandavas leaped to embrace him, as if they’d not seen him in years.



“Do you know,” he asked them, “who I was meditating on this morning?”

They shook their heads.

“I was meditating on Grandsire Bheeshma. Let us go to him.”

The Pandavas and Draupadi *finally* understood. Together with the sages and all their people, they set out for Kurukshetra.

Bheeshma was where they had left him all those days ago. How he bore the

pain, no one could explain. True to his vow, the son of Ganga remained alive, waiting for Hastinapur to be safe.

As Krishna came down on his knee beside Bheeshma, the best of the Kurus opened his eyes. "Lord," he said, "I was waiting for you."

Krishna looked into his pain-filled gaze. "I know. I have brought your grandsons with me to learn from you."

"With you by their side, what need have they of me, Giridhar?"

"Our elders are the most important teachers of dharma in society," Krishna said. "Yudhishtir faces the challenge of re-establishing dharma in a land corrupted by Duryodhan. Son of Ganga, you are the best of the Bharat clan. Advise Yudhishtir on the nature of kingship so that he may do his duty to the people."

Bheeshma turned his gaze to his grandsons who were seated around him.

"I killed my brother, Karn," Yudhishtir said. "I killed our people. How can I be worthy of the throne?"

"You are worthy because the nation needs you," Bheeshma told him, "and a nation is not just a piece of land. A nation is a culture, a philosophy, a people. Those people chose you long ago, Yudhishtir, and you cannot turn from them. A king," he told them all, "must put nothing before the needs of his people and their greatest need is dharma. Look at me," he said. "I put my vow before the people and what was the result? Hastinapur's court was corrupted. My daughter-in-law was abused. Our culture was degraded. By putting my vow before the people, I became a traitor to my country. For that crime, I deserve every one of these arrows. Just as Karn deserved his death for putting his friend, Duryodhan, before the nation. Drona put his son, Ashwatthama, before the nation and deserved his death too. Every one of us who chose to honor our loyalty to the king instead of to the nation deserved the death we received. So do not grieve for those who have fallen." Bheeshma shook his head. "Never put anything before the nation, my son. Not your children, not your vow, not even your grief. Rule the people with dharma. Let them live in *bhakti* and peace so that our land is enriched with true culture once more. This is your duty, Yudhishtir, for you are the heir to Hastinapur."

Yudhishthir listened as his grandsire released him from his grief and his doubt. Hastinapur was finally safe.

Bheeshma looked up at the sky, where the *devatas* were gathered to witness his final moments. He saw the sun pass into the northern hemisphere at the time of *Uttarayan*. The scriptures said that any who left their bodies at this time were liberated from the cycle of life and death. Seeing this most pure moment arrive, Bheeshma turned to Krishna. He chanted the Lord's names in the *Vishnu Sahasra* prayer. Then he said this:

"Lord," he said, "I have lived my whole life under the restraint of my vows. I have never desired any object or person or status. I could not desire because my mind could find nothing worthy of desiring. My mind is like an unmarried daughter and before I die, I wish to give my daughter—my mind—away to a worthy husband.

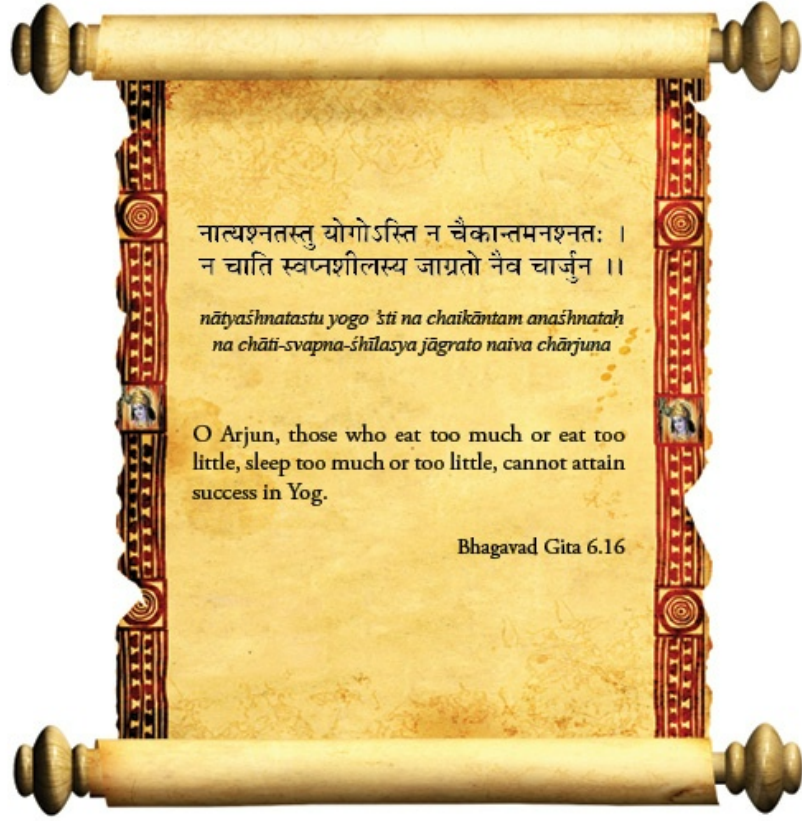
"In the whole world, who can be more worthy than you, Krishna? You are kindness, you are compassion, you are beauty, you are strength. All these days as I have lain here on this bed of arrows, I have meditated on the sight of you attacking me with the chariot wheel. You broke your word to shield Arjun. You broke your word to make my word true. You did not harm me even when I asked you to because I am your devotee. Krishna, witnessing that moment on the battlefield was the most glorious vision of my life. Lord, Giridhar, Krishna, I wish to give my daughter—my mind—away to you. Do you accept her?"

"Yes," Krishna stood and raised his hand in blessing. "Do not fear, Son of Ganga. I accept her."

Bheeshma gazed upon Krishna's radiant face. Chanting Krishna's name, he gave up his life. The celestials above showered flowers upon his body, chanting: "Glory! Glory!"

The Pandavas wept.

"Never again shall this world know a man like Bheeshma," Krishna told them. "Now he has attained the highest realm. My devotee is always in me and I am always in him. That is the power of *bhakti*."





57. Leaving the Material World

Krishna returned to Dwaraka and the Pandavas ruled in Hastinapur. Bheem was Yudhishtir's heir until a younger heir was chosen by the people. They gave Indraprastha into Yuyutsu's guardianship while they ruled in the capital of Hastinapur and the kingdom was whole once more.

Draupadi went about the duties of the queen every day, thinking of her sons who should have been with her. It was a heavy burden to live on when her most precious reasons for living were gone.

Subhadra joined the Pandavas in Hastinapur, having waited in Dwaraka for the war to end. Together, she and Draupadi cared for Uttara who soon gave birth to Parikshit. The sages predicted that Parikshit would grow to be a righteous warrior but that he would die from the curse of a sage.

Yudhishtir and Draupadi were horrified. What would their grandson do to be cursed by a sage? Yudhishtir thought of his father, Pandu, who'd died of Kindam's curse, and he asked the sages for answers. If Parikshit were capable of such mistakes then he could not be the heir.

"No, no, Great King," they told him. "Parikshit will be most worthy to rule and he will make his people happy. His curse will, in fact, lead to great *bhakti*."

Yudhishtir was stunned. “Tell me all.”

Kripa told him: “When he is much older, Parikshit will unknowingly wear the crown of the vanquished King Jarasandh that lies in your treasury. King Jarasandh’s malice that lingers in that crown will affect Parikshit’s mind and he will go hunting in the forest, where he will go past the hermitage of a sage. Feeling hungry and thirsty, he will enter to ask for food and water but the sage, deep in meditation, will not hear him. Influenced by Jarasandh’s crown, Parikshit will lay a dead snake around the sage’s neck to insult him for not responding. Parikshit will only realize his mistake when he takes the crown off. The sage’s son, however, will angrily curse Parikshit that the serpent king Takshak will bite him in seven days. When the sage himself awakens from meditation and finds out what has happened, he will warn Parikshit and Parikshit will renounce his throne. Crowning his son, Janmejaya, he will go into the forest and meet Sage Vyas’s son, Shukadev. Shukadev will recite the Shreemad Bhagavatam to him, a scripture entirely full of the glories of *bhakti* for Krishna. In the seven days of hearing it, Parikshit will attain salvation and provide all with the legacy of the Shreemad Bhagavatam.”

Yudhishtir and Draupadi listened in amazement but they were also relieved. As long as their grandson found *bhakti* for Krishna, all would be well for Parikshit and for the people.

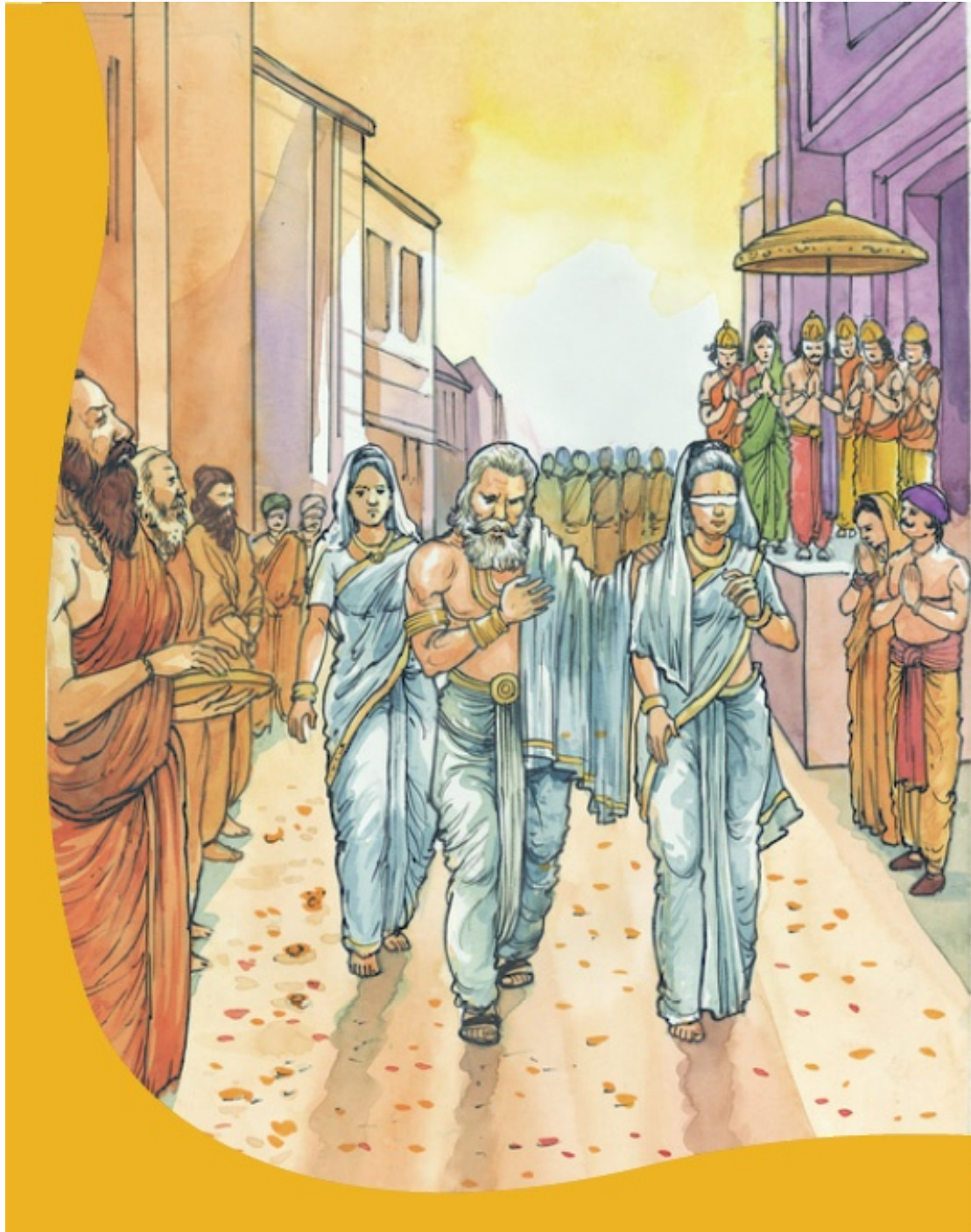
The years went by as the Pandavas worked to re-establish peace around the world through diplomacy, trade, art and culture, and in the practice of *yajnas* and *bhakti*. They made roads, built magnificent structures, and ensured that their people prospered. The rain fell when it should, the fields yielded harvest, the forests provided fruits and nuts and timber. Children were slowly born to replace the many lives lost at Kurukshetra. The world began to be normal once more. The people were not hungry or sick or homeless and they knew that they would always attain justice from Dharmaraj Yudhishtir.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari lived with the Pandavas in Hastinapur. The Pandavas and Draupadi served their Elder Father and Elder Mother with more devotion than the Kauravas had ever showed. They listened intently to any advice Dhritarashtra and Gandhari gave for the ruling of Hastinapur and followed their orders.

One day Vidur came to see his elder brother. "Are you not ashamed?" he asked Dhritarashtra. "To take service from your brother's sons even after you tried to rob them of everything?"

Dhritarashtra had no answer.

"You did not even repent when they returned victorious to Hastinapur. In the presence of Krishna himself, you tried to kill Bheem."



It was true. Dhritarashtra had said he wanted to make amends with the Pandavas and told Bheem to embrace him. But Krishna had known Dhritarashtra's heart and instructed Bheem to place a statue in Dhritarashtra's arms instead. Bheem used the same statue of himself that Duryodhan had used to practice mace fighting with. Dhritarashtra had put his arms around it and crushed it into dust. "Duryodhan!" Dhritastrahad cried out, "I have avenged you!"

When Krishna informed Dhritarashtra that he'd not killed Bheem at all, Dhritarashtra had been ashamed but not ashamed enough to leave Hastinapur. He lived there, surrounded by luxury, when he had given the people such grief.

"You should retire to the forest," Vidur told him now. "It is time for you to leave."

From beside Dhritarashtra, Gandhari spoke: "It is true. We should retire to the forest. Let the Pandavas rule without the constant reminder of our sons."

Kunti decided to leave with them. Blessing the Pandavas and Draupadi and Subhadra and Parikshit, the elders retired to the forest.

Vidur stayed in Hastinapur to help Yudhishtir run the kingdom but he visited Dhritarashtra often. One time when he visited, Dhritarashtra finally told him the truth. "I know that Krishna is the Almighty," he said. "I know that to worship and love him is the greatest destiny for any soul. But I am not capable of *bhakti*, Vidur. I have tried and tried to love Krishna or any name of God and I cannot."

Vidur knew why. Dhritarashtra, for all his knowledge and understanding, was a selfish man. Selfishness and love were incompatible and thus it made perfect sense that Dhritarashtra could not practice *bhakti*.

Yet Vidur loved his brother and wanted to find a way to help him. With all the terrible deeds Dhritarashtra had committed, if he performed no penance then he would suffer greatly in his next life. Vidur thus taught Dhritarashtra the discipline of *Ashtang yog* that Vidur had learned from the sages. Even though Dhritarashtra could not practice *bhakti yog*, he could still practice this form of yog and attain good spiritual knowledge that would aid him when he left his body.

Dhritarashtra practiced the postures and breathing exercises of *Ashtang yog* every day for years and slowly grew in spiritual enlightenment. He began to realize the wrongs he had committed and repent them, just a little.

One day, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, and Kunti were sitting outside their hut when they received terrible news from a traveler passing through. The city of Dwaraka had been destroyed by a feud within the Yadu clan. The Yadus had

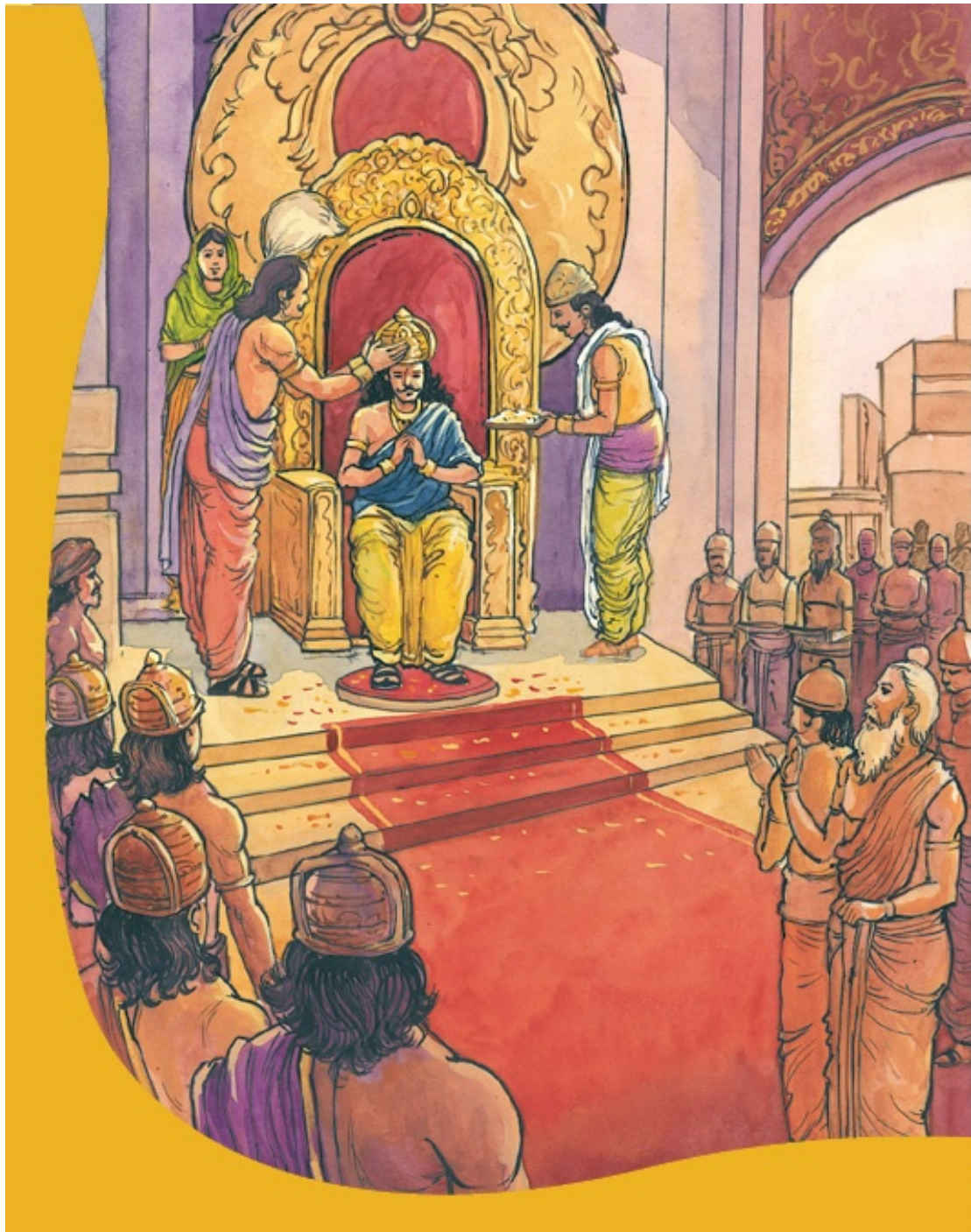
all perished. Krishna had retired to the forest and from there had left the earth.

The news broke Kunti. She collapsed.

Gandhari remembered her curse on Krishna and wept tears of regret. How could she have cursed the Lord?

The traveler left them and Dhritarashtra remained where he sat for hours. Suddenly he sniffed the air and smelled smoke. "There is a forest fire," he told the ladies.

"How close?" Gandhari asked.



“Very close. We’ll not be able to run fast enough.”

Gandhari was crouched beside Kunti, trying to revive her. “Why bother trying to run from it?” Gandhari said, lifting her blindfolded head to her husband. “We should walk towards it. For all that we have done to this world, it is a fitting end.” She tugged on Kunti’s shoulder. “Come, sister, it’s time for you to see Krishna again.”

At those words, Kunti revived and, holding hands, the three of them walked

into the fire.

The Pandavas in Hastinapur heard the news about Krishna at the same time their elders in the forest did. Arjun had gone to Dwaraka to visit his friend and had seen the devastation. The people left alive there had told him that Krishna had departed the mortal realm in the forest after he was shot in the foot by a hunter. Arjun had ridden home to Hastinapur, alone and bereft. He'd been so lost in grief that when two thieves accosted him on the road, he'd been too weak to stop them from robbing him. He came home and told his brothers that his strength was gone because all his strength had been Krishna.

The Pandavas decided that it was time for them to leave too. They'd ruled for thirty-six years after the war and now that Krishna was gone, the material world held nothing for them.

Parikshit was young but beloved by the people. Endowed with all the virtues of his parents, he was intelligent, spiritual, compassionate, calm, wise, and a skilled warrior. The people chose him for their heir and Yudhishtir installed Parikshit on the throne. Yudhishtir also installed Yuyutsu, the only son of Dhritarashtra still alive, as regent to aid Parikshit because Parikshit was still young. Kripa was Parikshit's guru while Dhaumya retired, returning to his forest *ashram*.

The Pandavas and Draupadi removed their royal clothes for the last time and put on the simple cotton of the renounced. The citizens of Hastinapur and all the land came to bid them farewell and the Pandavas distributed all their personal wealth amongst the people. They embraced them, one by one, and told them to take care of Hastinapur. The age of *Kali yug* was approaching and Parikshit would need all their loyalty and support.

Leaving their people, the Pandavas and Draupadi walked away from their wealth, their power, their throne. They renounced the material world.



58. The Final Test

The Pandavas with Draupadi travelled north to the foothills of the mighty Himalayas. They decided that this was the place to start the climb to the heavenly realm. Yudhishtir stayed at their head, followed by Draupadi, Bheem, Arjun, Nakul, and finally Sahadev.

At first the climb was gentle. Grassy slopes, frothing rivers, and flowers that grew in every color and shape. They savored each scent and sight and touch.

The journey slowly changed. Grassy slopes became rocky cliffs, and frothing rivers became ice cold waterfalls. The flowers became fewer and fewer in number until Draupadi couldn't see even one bee.

The warm sun became distant, lacking warmth despite being right above them. They shivered in their plain cotton clothes, trying to stay warm.

The air grew thinner until they couldn't breathe, and even though they wanted to stay warm by moving, they had to stop often to fill their lungs with air. Snow began to fall.

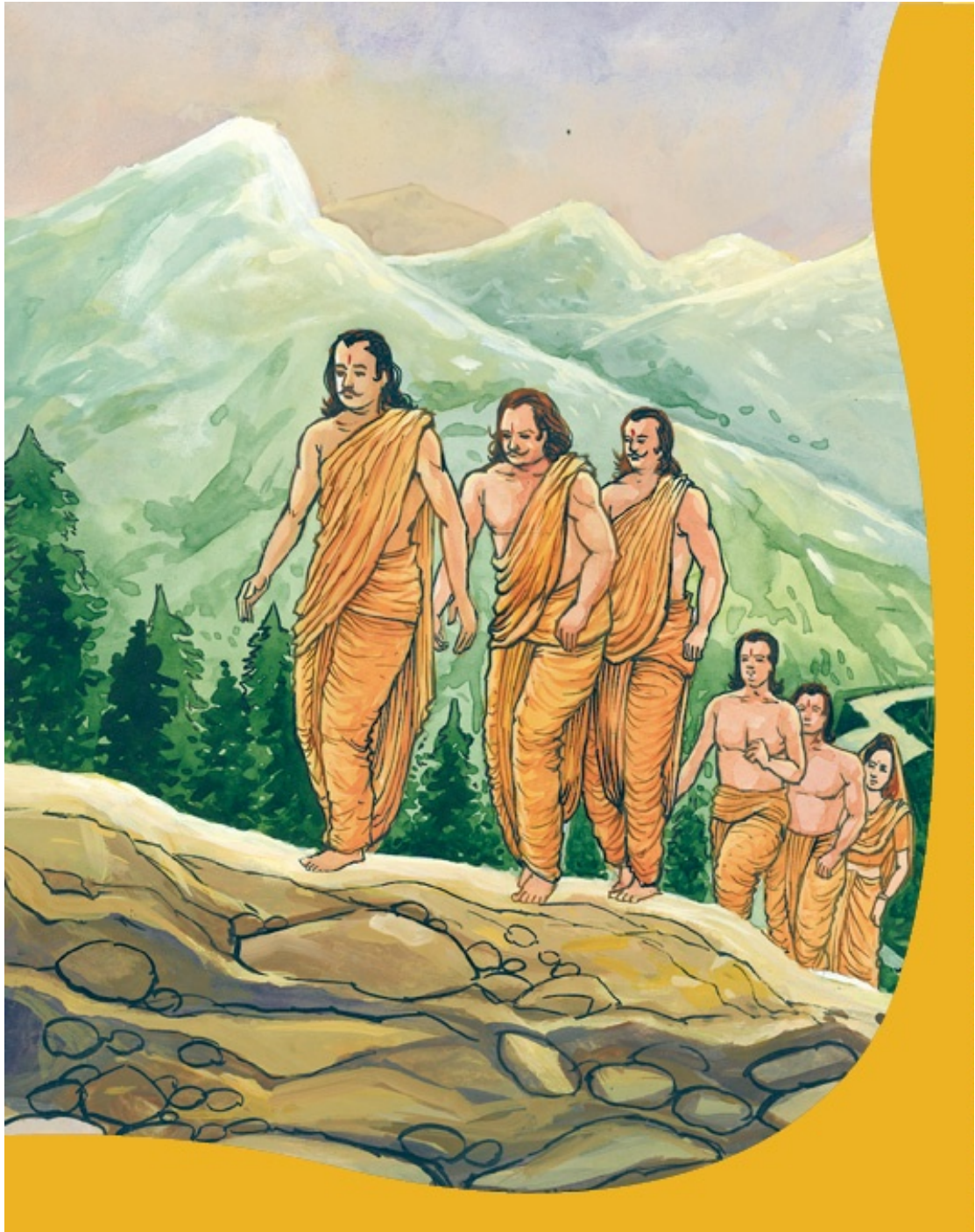
Somewhere along the way they obtained a companion in the form of a black dog. None of them knew when or how yet no matter how high they climbed or how fast they went, the dog followed them each step of the way. He stayed by

Yudhishtir's side, loping through the snow, his panting breaths clouding the air.

Draupadi was the slowest among them and although they stopped again and again for her, she still fell behind her husbands. The harsh wind cut through her, stuttering her breath, and she hugged herself, trying to stay warm.

Their hike through the mountains turned into a true climb. They had to scale cliffs and rock walls, and all without ropes or tools. They hauled each other up, digging their toes and fingers into any crevice they could find. They tried hard not to look down.

Draupadi reached upwards to grab a tree root and it slipped from her hand. She lost her balance and her foothold. She fell, screaming as she tumbled through the thin air onto the rocks below. Her husbands lunged to catch her too late.



Through the fog, they saw her lying on a jagged cliff, moaning in pain. Blood seeped from the back of her head, staining the snow beneath her.

The younger Pandavas gaped at each other, not knowing what to do. Yudhishtira, however, did not look at Draupadi or his brothers. He only turned north once more and continued the climb. "Don't stop or look back," he told his brothers. "We will see her in the next realm." They were silent for some moments. Then they followed him.

Sahadev was the next to fall. Then Nakul. Then Arjun. Then even mighty Bheem.

Each time, Yudhishtir did not stop nor look back. He said only that he would see them in the next realm.

The only one who remained with him was the black dog, braving the wind and snow and rocks. They climbed higher and higher until they were on the roof of the world, the highest point, and right there was the opening to the heavenly world.

It was a doorway in the cloud-filled sky, and through that doorway, Yudhishtir saw golden light, and warm grass, and sweet water.

Beside the doorway stood a glowing *devata* and Yudhishtir knew from how Arjun had described his father that this was Indra himself. Yudhishtir folded his hands and bowed.

“Welcome, Yudhishtir,” Indra said, his voice melodious. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Surely I’m not worthy of that, Lord Indra,” Yudhishtir said, not rising from his bow.

“You are Dharmaraj, son of Kunti. You have lived such a spiritual life that you and only you have been granted the right to enter the heavenly realm while still in your mortal body. That is why I wait here.”

Yudhishtir blinked through the snowflakes on his eyelashes. This was why his wife and brothers had fallen. They’d not been meant to enter in their material bodies. They’d had to experience death.

Indra glided down onto a rock. “Now you have a choice to make, Dharmaraj,” he said, gesturing to the opening.

Before Yudhishtir’s eyes, the opening split in two. One side remained the warm golden world that smelled of sweet grass. The other side was dark and cold, a sour rancid scent emanating from it. Yudhishtir covered his nose, trying not to breathe it in.

“Make your choice between these two,” Indra said. “Here is where the

Kauravas reside,” he said, gesturing to the warm golden world. “And here is where the Pandavas and Draupadi reside,” he said, pointing to the dark foul place.

Yudhishtir’s breath stopped in the cold. “What?” He pointed to the dark sour-smelling world. “That is where my family are? In *hell*?”

Indra was unaffected by the freezing wind. “They went where they were supposed to go.”

“But-but they were good! They followed dharma! How can the Kauravas be in heaven while my family is in hell?”

Indra crossed his arms over his chest. “Make your choice, Dharmaraj. In *Swarg* with your enemies or in hell with your family?”

Yudhishtir gazed at the warm heavenly world. All its joys would mean nothing without Draupadi or his brothers. “I choose hell,” he whispered, his breath frosting the air.

The dark opening slid shut and Indra smiled. “We wished to test your faithfulness to your family, Yudhishtir, and you have passed our test.”

Yudhishtir staggered in relief. He thanked the Almighty that his family was not in hell. “They followed me all my life,” he said to Indra. “They were faithful to me in every way. How could I do any less?”

“Then leave that dog and join them in the heavenly world.”

Yudhishtir was about to step forward when Indra’s words hit him. He looked down at the black dog by his side. “He cannot come with me?”

“A dog cannot enter *Swarg*.”

Yudhishtir gazed into its black eyes and it gazed back, patient, trusting.

He thought of his family awaiting him. He’d climbed so high to join them. But how could he leave this animal all alone? The harsh wind blew, cutting through Yudhishtir’s body. He laid his hand on the dog’s head. “Until this being can walk into heaven beside me,” Yudhishtir said, “I will not enter.”

Indra snorted. “Have you lost your senses, Yudhishtir? You would give up *Swarg* for a lowly dog?”

“He may be lowly to you but this silent companion is most high to me. He has stayed with me all this way and I cannot leave him now.” Yudhishtir stepped back, turning from the heavenly realm.

“Son of Kunti,” a deep voice beside him said.

Yudhishtir turned and saw that the dog was gone. A huge divine being stood in its place, with skin glowing like a burning ember. Yudhishtir fell to his knees before his father for it was his father, Dharmaraj, the lord of righteousness.

Dharmaraj lifted Yudhishtir to his feet. “I became that humble dog to test your faith and you did not let me down, my dear. You were faithful to me even at great cost to yourself.”

Yudhishtir’s tears fell, turning to drops of ice in the cold. “Lord,” he whispered. “All this time, it was you by my side?”

Dharmaraj nodded. “All this time. In every moment.”

Yudhishtir remembered Krishna. He’d thought Krishna had left him when Krishna left the mortal realm. Now Yudhishtir saw that Krishna had never left him at all.

“Even when you couldn’t see or hear or smell my presence, I was with you, my son.” Dharmaraj said. “When you refused to leave the dog, you refused to leave me. This is the ultimate test of faith and you passed it.” Dharmaraj embraced Yudhishtir. “Come with me, now.”

Yudhishtir felt himself enveloped by light and warmth and love. He was home.



युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु ।
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥

*yuktāhāra-vihārasya yukta-cheṣṭasya karmasu
yukta-svapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkha-hā*

But those who are temperate in eating and recreation, balanced in work, and regulated in sleep, can mitigate all sorrows by practicing Yog.

Bhagavad Gita 6.17



59. Janmejaya's Eyes Are Opened

Sage Vaishampayan looked at King Janmejaya who sat at his feet. They had sat like this day after day, as Vaishampayan narrated this sacred Mahabharat scripture. They had stopped only for brief rests because the entire *yajna* crowd was totally absorbed in the *katha*.

Each day, Janmejaya had felt like a new secret was revealed to him until so many secrets were revealed that the world was a whole new reality.

He folded his palms. "Sage Vaishampayan, I cannot thank you enough."

"There's no need to thank me, Great King. The glory belongs to my Gurudev."

They turned to Sage Vyas who sat beside them. He smiled. "The glory belongs to my Krishna."

Janmejaya's eyes filled with tears. "Krishna shielded my father while my father was still only a fetus. Krishna even named him Parikshit!"

Vyas looked into the distance. "You wouldn't exist if he had not shielded your father. None of us would be here. No one would be listening to the Mahabharat."

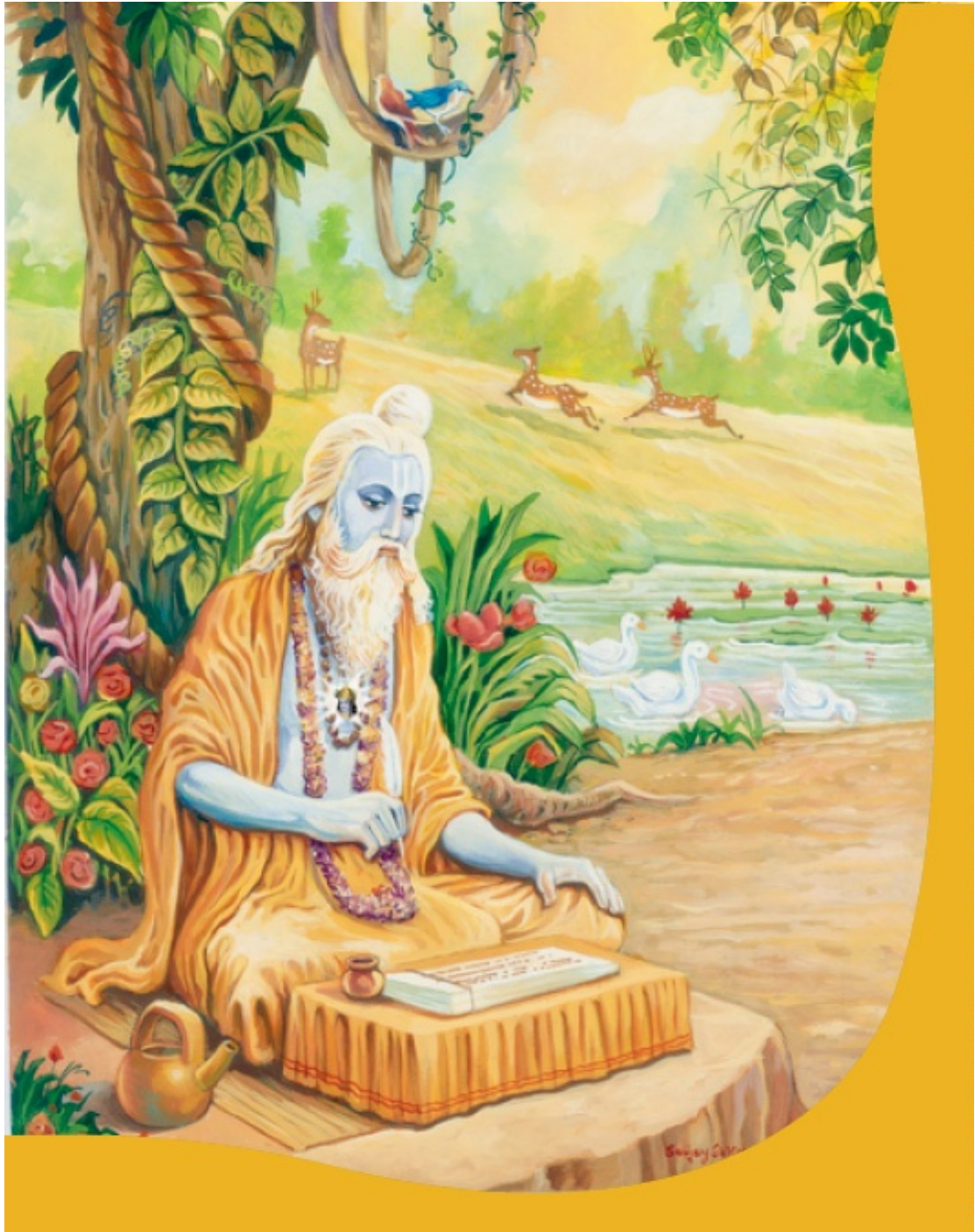
Vaishampayan leaned forward. "Do you know, Janmejaya, that your father

always wondered who he'd seen in his mother's womb. He always searched for that beautiful light, that loving face. He always wondered what that person's name was."

"Did he find out? Did he learn the name?"

"Yes. But only after he was cursed to die of Takshak's bite. When Parikshit found out that he had only seven days to live, he put you on the throne as the most worthy heir, and went into the forest. There, Shukadev recited to him the Shreemad Bhagavatam. Parikshit listened to the entire scripture in seven days and at the end, he said that he could see Krishna before his very eyes. When Takshak came to bite him, Parikshit was glad because it meant that all his ties to the material world were finished. Krishna was all he wanted."

Janmejaya held his hands to his chest. "So, in truth, Takshak saved him?"



“He liberated Parikshit who went on to Krishna’s realm.”

Janmejay bowed his head, realizing how wrong he’d been. He’d blamed all serpents when really he should have thanked them. “I have done a terrible thing,” he whispered.

“And now you have repented,” Vaishampayan said. “You have absorbed the Mahabharat and opened your heart to dharma. Now all you must do is live according to its teachings. That is what your father would want and that is

why we all came here.”

Janmejaya looked up at his spiritual master Vaishampayan. “Great Sage, what should I do now?”

“You are a king. Rule your people with dharma as your aid. Speak and act with truth. And always, Janmejaya, always remember Krishna in your heart. Develop pure *bhakti* for him. That is the way to victory. That is the purpose of your life.”

Janmejaya nodded.

“You are a king and that means that you must always defend your people. But true defense comes from love and justice. True defense comes from dharma. *Ahimsa paramo dharma* means that non-violence is the greatest path, Janmejaya. It is the path that your ancestors, the Pandavas, wished they could have walked. They tried to walk it again and again, and only when there was no other way did they fight the Kauravas. So do not war when there is no need. Do not create pain when you may create peace.”

Vaishampayan gestured to the sky. “Krishna himself was a messenger of peace to Hastinapur. He moved his people from Mathura to Dwaraka to protect them from war. He was teaching us all that peace is worth every effort. Do not abandon it easily. Instead, nurture it, feed it, let it thrive.

“There are two trees in the Mahabharat. One tree has Duryodhan as its trunk. Its thick branches are Karn, its thin branches are Shakuni and Dushasan, and its leaves and fruit as the other ninety-eight Kauravas. That tree’s roots are Dhritarashtra himself. It is the tree of anger.

“The second tree has Yudhishtira as its trunk. Its thick branches are Bheem, its thinner branches are Arjun, and its leaves and fruit are Nakul and Sahadev. That tree’s roots are Krishna himself. That tree, Janmejaya, is the tree of dharma. Ask yourself which tree you wish to shelter under.

“Life is a long journey. You will have to make many decisions. There will be times when you make mistakes yet even when you make such mistakes, if you repent with an honest heart then Krishna will accept you. Krishna’s love is unconditional. When we have *bhakti* for him, there is nothing he won’t do for us, just like there was nothing he wouldn’t do for Bheeshma, or Gandhari, or

Arjun. He even tried to protect Karn but Karn pushed him away. As did Duryodhan and Dhritarashtra.”

Janmejaya sat in silence, seeing the two trees in his mind. He had been sitting under the tree of anger when Astika and Vyas and Vaishampayan had come to him. Now he would choose the tree of dharma.

“Great Sage Vaishampayan,” he said, “you have opened my eyes. Just as my father Parikshit found Shukadeva, and my grandfather Arjun found Krishna, I have found you. You are my savior because you have destroyed my delusions and my pride. Because of you, I will walk the path of dharma and *bhakti*. Because of you, I feel Krishna residing in my heart. I thank you and Sage Vyas and Sage Astika with all that I am and all that I have. What can I do to repay you?”

“The only way to repay your guru is by sharing his knowledge with others,” Vaishampayan said. “Give it to those who wish to learn, whose minds and hearts are engaged in seeking truth. Do not give it to those who are unwilling to listen. That is how you will repay the wealth you have received.”

Janmejaya bowed down, touching his forehead to Vaishampayan’s feet. “Great Sage,” he said, “I will do as you command.”

All those Pundits and sages and guests of the *yajna*, the many thousands who had sat and listened to the *katha* with Janmejaya, all bowed to Vaishampayan.

Vaishampayan raised his hand to bless the king and all the people, then he himself stood and turned to Vyas. Vaishampayan bowed, touching his forehead to his guru’s feet.

Vyas raised his hand and blessed him.

All the people bowed to Vyas also and when they sat up, they saw that Vyas was blessing all of them. They saw that blazing in the center of Vyas’ chest was Krishna himself. His hand was lifted in blessing, his lotus eyes smiling, and he gazed upon all of them, accepting their *bhakti*.

“Greater than I are my devotees. I am helpless before their love.”



Characters

Abhimanyu – Son of Arjun and Subhadra, father of Parikshit, husband of Uttara

Adhirath – King Dhritarashtra's retired charioteer, adopted father of Karn

Agni – *Devata* of fire, connected to Draupadi and Dhritadyumna as they were born out of a *yajna*

Akrur – Warrior of Yadu clan, friend to Vasudev and Devaki, leader of resistance against Kansa

Amba – Eldest of the three princesses of Kashi, rejected by king of Shalva and Bheeshma, reborn as Shikhandi

Ambika – Wife of Vichitravirya, queen of Hastinapur, mother of Dhritarashtra

Ambika's maid – Vidur's mother, devotee of Vishnu, servant to Ambika and Ambalika

Ambalika – Wife of Vichitravirya, queen of Hastinapur, mother of Pandu

Arjun – Third eldest son of Pandu and Kunti, son of Indra, known as greatest archer

Ashwatthama – Son of Dronacharya and Kripa, friend of Duryodhan

Ashwini Twins – *Devas* of medicine and healing, physicians of the *devatas*, fathers to Nakul and Sahadev

Astik – Young sage who visits Janmejay during the Sarp *yajna*

Bakasur – *Rakshas*, holding the city of Ekchakra hostage

Balaram – Seventh son of Devaki and Vasudev, transplanted to Rohini's womb, elder brother of Krishna

Bhagyavan – Vidur's wife, devotee of Krishna

Bharadwaj – Sage who performed the *yajna* through which Bhumanyu was born

Bharat – Emperor, created empire of Bharat, adopted Bhumanyu as his heir

Bheem – Second eldest son of Pandu and Kunti, son of Vayu, known as most strong man

Bheeshma – Son of Ganga and Shantanu, named Bheeshma by step-mother Satyawati



Bheeshmak – King of Vidarbha, father of Rukmini

Bhumanyu – Son of Bharadwaj, born from a *yajna*, became Emperor Bharat's heir

Boatman – Laborer who takes Pandavas across the river at Varnavat

Brihannala – Arjun's alias as dance teacher to Princess Uttara in Matsya

Chanda-Kaushik – Sage, granted mango to King Vrihadrath that led to birth of Jarasandh

Chitrangad – Elder son of Shantanu and Satyawati, king of Hastinapur, died in battle

Chitrasen – The celestial master of music and dance, teaches Arjun

Devavrat – Birth name of Bheeshma, son of Ganga and Shantanu, took vows to allow his father to marry Satyawati

Devaki – Second wife of Vasudev, mother of Balaram and Krishna

Dharmaraj – *Devata* of righteousness and truth, father to Yudhishtir, also the name given to Yudhishtir as dharma's representative on earth

Dhaumya – Sage, priest to the Pandavas, very pure hearted

Dhrishtadyumna – Son of King Drupad, twin brother of Draupadi, born out of a *yajna*

Dhritarashtra – Son of Ambika, born with Vyas's blessing, elder to Pandu, father of Duryodhan



Digger – Laborer who digs tunnel under the palace at Varnavat

Draupadi – Incarnation of *Devi Shree*, wife of Pandavas, daughter of King Drupad, twin sister of Dhrishtadyumna, born out of a *yajna* and thus called Agni Jyotsna meaning Fire's daughter

Dronacharya – Son of Bharadwaj, disciple of Parashuram, husband of Kripi, father of Ashwatthama, guru of Pandavas and Kauravas

Drupad – King of Panchal, father of Draupadi, Dhrishtadyumna, and Shikhandi, enemy of Drona

Duryodhan – Eldest Kaurava, one of a hundred sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, crown prince of Hastinapur

Durvasa – Sage, incarnation of Lord Shiv, guru of Kunti, gave boon that led to birth of Pandavas

Dushasan – Second eldest Kaurava, one of a hundred sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari

Dushyant – Kuru king, husband of Shakuntala, father of Emperor Bharat

Fisherman – Satyawati's father

Gandhari – Wife of Dhritarashtra, mother of one hundred Kauravas, queen of Hastinapur

Ganga – *Devi* of the river, Mother of Bheeshma, wife of Shantanu

Ghatotkach – Bheem and Hidimba's son, *rakshas*, very powerful

Giridhar – One of Krishna's names, meaning Mountain-lifter

Gopas – The young cowherds of Vraj, friends and devotees of Krishna

Gopis – The milkmaids of Vraj, devotees and lovers of Krishna

Goverdhan – Divine mountain in Vraj, Krishna's own form as a mountain

Govind – One of Krishna's names, meaning Protector of Nature

Granthik – Nakul's alias as head stableman in Matsya

Hanuman – Son of Vayu, incarnation of Lord Shiv, brother of Bheem, sits in Arjun's chariot flag at Kurukshetra

Hastin – Son of Suhotra, became king, built capital city of Hastinapur

Hidimb – *Rakshas*, brother of Hidimba, very powerful

Hidimba – *Rakshasi*, Hidimb's sister, Bheem's first wife, mother of Ghatotkach

Indra – King of the devatas, father of Arjun

Janmejaya – King of Hastinapur, son of Parikshit

Jara – *Rakshasi*, found Jarasandh in the forest as a baby

Jarasandh – King of Magadh, father-in-law to Kansa

Jayadrath – Duryodhan's brother-in-law and king of Sindhu

Kansa – Brother of Devaki, uncle of Krishna, became king of Mathura through military coup

Kank – Yudhishtir's alias as advisor to the king of Matsya

Kanva – Sage, Shakuntala's adopted father, Bharat's grandfather

Karn – Eldest son of Kunti with Surya, friend of Duryodhan, king of Anga

Keechak – Brother to Sudeshna, defender of Matsya

Kindam – Sage, died by Pandu's hand with his wife

King of Shalva – Love of Amba, enemy of Bheeshma

Kripacharya – Son of a sage, twin brother of Kripa, guru to the Bharat clan

Kripa – Twin sister of Kripacharya, wife of Dronacharya, mother of Ashwatthama

Krishna – The Supreme Lord, Radha's other half, Lord of Dwaraka, Yadu prince, son of Devaki and Vasudev

Krishnaa – Another name for Draupadi, meaning dark-skinned

Kubja – Devotee of Krishna, hunchback, lives in Mathura

Kunti – Wife of Pandu, mother of Pandavas (birth mother to Yudhishtir/Bheem/Arjun), mother of Karn, queen of Hastinapur

Lakshmi – *Devi*, wife of Vishnu, the Divine Mother

Madhav – One of Krishna's names, meaning Lord of Yogmaya

Madri – Second wife of Pandu, mother of Nakul and Sahadev, sister of Shalya



Maya *danav* – Highly skilled architect of the *danavas*

Naag Raj – Lord of serpents, Kunti's maternal grandfather

Nakul – Elder son of Pandu and Madri, son of Ashwini Twins, known as most beautiful man

Nand – Foster father of Krishna, husband of Yashoda, chief of Gokul and Nandagaon

Narad – Sage, celestial, can travel anywhere in the universe, devotee of Vishnu, guru of many important personalities

Nataraj – A name of Lord Shiv, meaning Lord of Dance.

Pandu – Son of Ambalika, born with Vyas's blessing, younger to Dhritarashtra and elder to Vidur

Parashuram – Avatar of Vishnu, sage, guru of Bheeshma, Drona, and Karn

Parikshit – Son of Abhimanyu and Uttara, grandson of Arjun, king of Hastinapur

Potter in Kampilya – Hosted Kunti and the Pandavas in his guest house

Prativindhya – Draupadi's son with Yudhishtir

Pundit in Ekchakra – Hosted Kunti and the Pandavas during their stay in that city

Pundit in Indraprastha – Has his cows robbed and goes to Arjun for help

Pundit in Kampilya – Speaks to Pandavas at Draupadi's *swayamvar*, says the Kauravas are evil

Purochan – Architect, designs and builds palace at Varanasi

Putana – Kansa's nurse, *rakshasi*, attempts to kill Krishna on Kansa's orders

Radha – The Supreme Divine Mother, embodiment of Divine Energy, physical manifestation of Krishna's Love

Radha in Hastinapur – Wife of Adhirath, adopted mother of Karn

Rohini – First wife of Vasudev, mother of Balaram and Subhadra

Rukman – Younger prince of Vidarbha, brother of Rukmini

Rukmi – Prince of Vidarbha, brother of Rukmini

Rukmini – Incarnation of *Devi* Lakshmi, another form of Radha, wife of Krishna, Divine Mother

Sahadev – Youngest son of Pandu and Madri, son of Ashwini Twins, known

as the wisest man

Sahadev in Magadh – Jarasandh's son, king of Magadh

Sairindhri – Draupadi's alias as maid to Queen Sudheshna of Matsya

Sandipani – Sage, Krishna and Balaram's guru

Sanjay – King Dhritarashtra's charioteer and messenger, loyal to Hastinapur, honest

Sarvadaman – The name of Bharat given by his grandfather Kanva, meaning 'subduer of all'

Satyaki – One of Krishna's friends, very powerful warrior, helps the Pandavas

Satyavati – Daughter of a fisherman, married to King Shantanu

Shakuni – Prince of Gandhar, later king, brother of Gandhari and uncle to Kauravas

Shakuntala – Adopted daughter of Sage Kanva, wife to King Dushyant, mother of Bharat

Shalya – King of Madra, brother of Madri, uncle to Pandavas

Shantanu – King of Hastinapur, father of Bheeshma, husband to Ganga and Satyawati

Shatanik – Draupadi's son with Nakul

Shesh Naag – Lord Vishnu's expansion of power, incarnates as Balaram

Shikhandi – Elder son of King Drupad, reincarnation of Princess Amba

Shishupal – King of Chedi, affianced to Rukmini, cousin to Krishna on maternal side

Shree – *Devi*, a form of Lakshmi, the Divine Mother

Shrutadeva – Mother of Shishupal, sister to Vasudev, aunt to Krishna

Shrutakarman – Draupadi's son with Arjun

Shrutasen – Draupadi’s son with Sahadev

Shukadev – Vyas’s son, enlightened sage who spoke the Shreemad Bhagavatam to Parikshit

Subal – King of Gandhar, father of Gandhari and Shakuni

Subhadra – Daughter of Vasudev and Rohini, sister of Krishna and Balaram, Arjun’s wife, mother of Abhimanyu

Sudheshna – Queen of Matsya, wife of Viraat, mother of Uttara and Uttara

Suhotra – Bhishma’s son, became his heir

Sunand – Pundit messenger, Rukmini’s friend and guru, Krishna’s devotee

Sunanda – King Bharat’s wife, acted mother to Bhishma

Surya – *Devata* of the Sun, father of Karn

Susharma – King of Trigarta, friend of Duryodhan, enemy of Viraat

Sutasoma – Draupadi’s son with Bhishma

Suvahu – King of Kashi

Takshak – Serpent Lord, bit Parikshit, leading to Janmejay’s desire to wipe out all serpents

Tantripal – Sahadev’s alias as head cowherd in Matsya

Ugrasena – Father of Kansa, king of Mathura

Uluka – Son of Shakuni and heir to Gandhar

Uttanka – Sage who told Janmejay to do *Sarp yajna*

Uttara – Son of King Viraat and Queen Sudeshna, crown prince of Matsya, brother of Uttara

Uttara – Daughter of King Viraat and Queen Sudeshna of Matsya, mother of Parikshit, wife of Abhimanyu

Vaishampayan – Sage, disciple of Vyas, guru of Janmejay, narrator of the

Mahabharat

Vallabh – Bheem’s alias as head cook for the king of Matsya

Vasudev – Husband of Devaki and Rohini, father of Balaram, Krishna, and Subhadra, Yadu prince

Vayu – Devata of wind, father of Bheem and Hanuman

Vichitravirya – Younger son of Shantanu and Satyawati, king of Hastinapur, died of illness.

Vidur – Son of maid, born with Vyas’s blessing, younger brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu

Vikarn – One of the hundred Kauravas, son of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari

Viraat – King of Matsya, husband of Sudeshna, father of Uttar and Uttara

Vishwakarma – *Devata* of Architecture

Vrihadrath – King of Magadh, father of Jarasandh

Vrihadrath’s two queens – Mothers of Jarasandh

Vyas – Avatar of Vishnu, son of Satyawati and Sage Parashar, writer of the Mahabharat, Great Sage of history who revealed, compiled and wrote many scriptures

Yaksha – Celestial being who exudes power and wealth

Yamunu – *Devi* of the river, devotee of Krishna

Yashoda – Foster mother of Krishna, wife of Nand

Yogishwar – One of Lord Shiv’s names, meaning Lord of the Yogis.

Yogmaya – *Devi* of material energy, form of Radha, serves Lord Vishnu, takes birth as Yashoda’s daughter

Yudhishtir – Eldest son of Pandu and Kunti, son of Dharmaraj, known as Dharmaraj on earth

Yuyutsu – Son of Dhritarashtra and his second wife



Glossary

Arati – A ceremony of light in which a lamp is waved around a person or God with reverence and faith, meant to bestow blessings and protection

Adharma – The opposite of dharma – evil, cruelty, disregard for law

Ashram – The name for where a sage lives, peaceful and non-violent

Ashtang yog – The physical discipline of yog, including postures, breathing, and meditation exercises, the eight-fold process of yog propagated by Sage Patanjali

Asuras – Demons, cousins to the *danavs* and *rakshas*.

Bhakti– The path of devotion and love for the Lord, also known as *bhakti* yog

Brahmastra – Lord Brahma’s divine weapon, so powerful it can destroy the universe

Chakra – Wheel

Chakravyuh – Highly complex wheel formation of military phalanx in battle

Chedi – Kingdom ruled by King Shishupal

Danav – Demons, cousins to the *asuras*, and *rakshas*

Daal – A soup made from lentils and spices

Devatas – The celestial beings, the servants of the Supreme Lord who govern aspects of the material world, their names are names of God because they are his representatives

Devi – Lady or goddess

Dharma – The science of being, the laws of nature, the eternal pattern of behavior that guides us all, responsibilities and duties that are appropriate for a person

Dhaumya – The priest of the Pandavas, met while they were in hiding after the Varnavat conspiracy

Dronacharya/Drona – The guru of the Pandavas and Kauravas

Dwaraka – Island city designed by Vishwakarma, home of Krishna and Yadu clan

Ekchakra – City ruled by *rakshas* Bakasur after killing the original king

Gandiv – Arjun's divine bow, gifted with an inexhaustible quiver by Indra

Gandhar – Kingdom ruled by Shakuni, where Gandhari is from

Gandharva – A celestial being skilled in arts such as music and dance

Ghee – Clarified butter

Gopas – Young cowherd boys of Vraj, devotees and friends of Krishna

Gopis – Milkmaids of Vraj, devotees of Krishna, the head *Gopi* is Radha

Guru – God-realized teacher, spiritual master

Gurudev – The name by which students address their guru

Hastinapur – Capital city of the Bharat clan, also known of the Kuru clan

Himalayas – The highest mountain range on Earth, very sacred, borders the northern part of India

Indra – The king of Swarg, *devata* of the sky

Indraprastha – A city so beautiful that it resembles Indra's celestial city in *Swarg*

Kali yug – Age of chaos that started immediately after Krishna left the earth, the present era

Kampilya – Capital city of Panchal

Karm – Action, also known as the law of *Karm* – for every action there is a reaction, to work in accordance with the prescribed rules of the Vedas

Kashi – Ancient city ruled by King Suvala

Katha – Telling a story, reciting the scriptures

Kaurava – The name given to the hundred sons of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra meaning descendants of the Kurus

Khandav Prastha – A land covered by wild forests and swamps

Kripacharya/Kripa – The priest of the Bharat clan

Kuru – The name of the clan, descendant of King Kuru, also known as the Bharat clan

Kurukshetra – The field of the Kurus, a very sacred land, where the Mahabharat war occurred

Laborer – The workers of society including farmers, carpenters, potters, metal workers, servants, boatmen and all craftsmen

Madra – Kingdom ruled by King Shalya, brother of Madri

Magadh – Kingdom ruled by Jarasandh

Maharaas – Divine dance performed by Radha and Krishna with the *gopis*, the bliss of Divine love.

Mantra – A divine word or sound that purifies the mind and atmosphere

Mathura – Capital city of the Yadus until Krishna moves the court to Dwarka

Matsya – Kingdom ruled by King Viraat

Mendicant – A holy man who travels the land, begging for his food

Mudra – Postures of the hand that seal and control the energy of the body and mind

Panchal – The kingdom where Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna were born,

ruled by Drupad

Pandava – The name given to the sons of Pandu

Pakora – A type of deep fried food, made from chickpea flour and vegetables

Pashupatastra – Lord Shiv's divine weapon, infallible, can destroy the universe

Puja – Ceremony of worship

Pundit – Intellectuals, priests, scholars, wise men, guardians of the scriptures and teachers of mankind

Puranas – A category of scriptures of Hinduism, provide philosophic knowledge that discusses the creation, destruction, and preservation of the universe, describe certain forms of God and his pastimes, there are eighteen Puranas in total, written by Vyas

Raj tilak – The anointing of a king

Rajsuyayajna – A type of *yajna*, bestows the title of Emperor

Rakshas – Demon

Rakshasi – Demoness

Rangoli – Design of rice, flowers, or colored powder, usually laid down at festivals or celebrations, meant to bestow auspiciousness and beauty

Rishi – Sage

Roti – Type of Indian flatbread, a staple in many north Indian meals

Sarpyajna – Type of *yajna*, destroys all serpents in the world

Shaal tree – Type of tree, very tall and slender

Shalva – Kingdom ruled by the lover of Amba

Shami tree – Type of tree, also known as a *Khejadi* tree

Shantanu – Father of Bheeshma

Shakti – Divine Mother of the Universe, also the name of Indra's infallible

divine weapon

Shesh nag – Lord Vishnu's expansion, incarnates as Balaram

Shiv – Another form of Almighty God, depicted as wearing dreadlocks, deer skin, holding a trident, with consort Divine Mother Parvati

Shiv Dhanush yajna– Type of *yajna* to worship Lord Shiv's bow

Shiv Ling – The symbol of Lord Shiv worshipped in temples, can be made of stone, mud, glass, crystal, usually conical-shaped, pillar shaped, or egg-shaped

Shreemad Bhagavatam – The most important of the eighteen Puranas, written by Vyas, has 18,000 verses, full of philosophical knowledge of the names, forms, virtues, and pastimes of the Avatars of God.

Som yajna – Type of *yajna*, said to bestow blessings from the *devatas* in the form of a drink that gives wisdom

Sudarshan chakra– Lord Vishnu's divine discus weapon, wielded by Krishna

Swarg – The heavenly realm still within the material world, ruled by King Indra of the *devatas*

Swayamvar – A ceremony where princesses choose their husbands

Taat Shree – The affectionate name Bheeshma is called by his nephews and their wives, meaning Dear Father, a term for respected elders

Tamal tree – A tree native to India, very dark in color

Tandav Nritya – The dance of destruction performed by Lord Shiv as Nataraj

Tilak – A mark applied to forehead with vermillion, sandalwood, or ash that bestows auspiciousness, the style can be particular to one's faith or spiritual tradition

Uttarayan – The time of year when the sun passes from the southern hemisphere into the northern

Vaid – Doctor

Vayu – The *devata* of wind

Vedas – The four core scriptures of Hinduism, eternal knowledge of God that manifested at the beginning of creation and was passed down from master to disciple through the oral tradition, finally divided and written in four books by Vyas called Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda

Vedic – A name to describe anything that comes from the Vedas

Vidarbha – Kingdom ruled by King Bheeshmak, where Rukmini is from

Vishnu Sahasra – Also known as *Vishnu Sahasra nam*, the thousand names of Vishnu recited by Bheeshma on his bed of arrows

Vraj – The land in the district of Mathura, India, where Radha and Krishna performed many pastimes, includes many holy places like Vrindavan, Govardhan, Barsana, Gokul, Nandagaon

Yadu – An ancient clan of Bharat in which Krishna takes birth, named after King Yadu, whose descendants are also known as Yadavas

Yajna/yajna – A Vedic ceremony of fire sacrifice where mantras are chanted and *ghee* and grains are offered into the fire pit, bestows blessings and power and boons

Yaksha – A celestial being who exudes power and wealth

Yog – The process of union with God, takes many forms such as *Bhakti yog*, *Karmyog*, *Jnanayog*, and *Ashtangyog*



Jagadguru Shree Kripaluji Maharaj

A Brief Introduction

Eternally liberated Divine personalities sometimes descend upon the earth for the welfare of humankind. Jagadguru Shree Kripalu ji Maharaj is such a Divine personality. “Maharajji”, as he is lovingly called by his devotees, was born on the auspicious night of Sharat Poornima in 1922, in the village Mangarh, near Allahabad and left this world on the 15th of November, 2013

Childhood and youth

He spent his childhood excelling effortlessly in his studies. Then at the age of fourteen, he left his village and attended three Universities, in Kashi, Chitrakoot and Indore . There he covered a whole series of courses in the space of just two-and-a-half years.

Absorption in Divine Samadhi

At the young age of sixteen, he suddenly gave up his studies and entered the dense forests of Chitrakoot. There he spent his time absorbed in intense of love for Radha Krishna. Often he would lose all external consciousness, and go without eating and drinking for many days at a stretch. For long intervals, he would remain in Mahabhav, the highest stage of devotion that manifests in Radharani. These symptoms of Mahabhav love had also had also manifested in Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, 500 years ago. He emerged from the forest after two years to begin his mission of revealing the glories of Radha Krishna devotion to the world.

Devotional literature

Kripaluji Maharaj has written thousands of verses revealing the Divine pastimes of Radha Krishna. His style of writing is unique: he begins the chanting of a pada or kirtan, and then keeps adding lines to it, as it goes along.

Kirtan movement

He then started conducting satsangs that brought about a flood of bhakti in the states of UP and Rajasthan in the 1940s and 50s. He would lead kirtans imbued with intense devotion, which would continue throughout the night. These kirtans, which he wrote himself, have been compared by scholars with those of Meerabai, Soordas, Tulsidas, and Ras Khan.

Jagadguruttam

In the past 5000 years of the present age of Kali, five personalities have been recognized as original Jagadgurus: Jagadguru Shankaracharya, Jagadguru Nimbarkacharya, Jagadguru Ramanujacharya, Jagadguru Madhvacharya.

In January 1957, Shree Kripalu ji Maharaj gave a profound series of lectures at the invitation of the Kashi Vidvat Parishad, a body of 500 of the topmost Vedic scholars of India who collectively represent the seat of spiritual learning. With profound admiration, the scholars accepted that his knowledge was deeper than the combined knowledge of all 500 of them put together. They unanimously acclaimed him as Jagadguru, the Spiritual Master of the world. They further added that he was "Jagadguruttam," or Supreme amongst all Jagadgurus.

Scriptural Discourses

After accepting the title of Jagadguru, Kripaluji Maharaj travelled throughout the country for fourteen years. He would deliver month-long discourses in each city, in which he would unravel the mysteries of the scriptures before the public. Tens of thousands of people would throng to these discourses, and listen spellbound while he tantalized them with humour, worldly examples, practical instructions, and chastisement. It was a unique experience as he made the deepest scriptural truths accessible to everyone in the simplest language.

Worldwide mission

To enable the worldwide spread of his teachings, Kripaluji Maharaj began training preachers and sending them to different parts of the globe. He also created a formal organization and began the construction of huge ashrams, to provide facilities for devotees who wished to practically apply the teachings in

their lives. This organization is today known as the Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat, and it oversees the worldwide mission of Maharajji. Its sister organizations are Jagadguru Kripalu Yog Trust in India, Jagadguru Kripaluji Yog in USA, and Radha Govind Dham in various cities around the world.

(For more information, please visit www.jkyog.org)



Other Publications by Jagadguru Kripaluji Yog

1. Inspiring stories for Children Volume 1
2. Inspiring Stories for Children Volume 2
3. Inspiring Stories for Children Volume 3
4. Inspiring Stories for Children Volume 4
5. Saints of India
6. Festivals of India
7. Bal-Mukund Wisdom Book
8. Bal-Mukund Painting Book
9. Healthy Body Healthy Mind – Yoga for Children
10. Yoga for the Body, Mind and Soul
11. Spiritual Dialectics
12. Bhagavad Gita - The Song of God